CATHERINE HERSELF

JAMES HILTON

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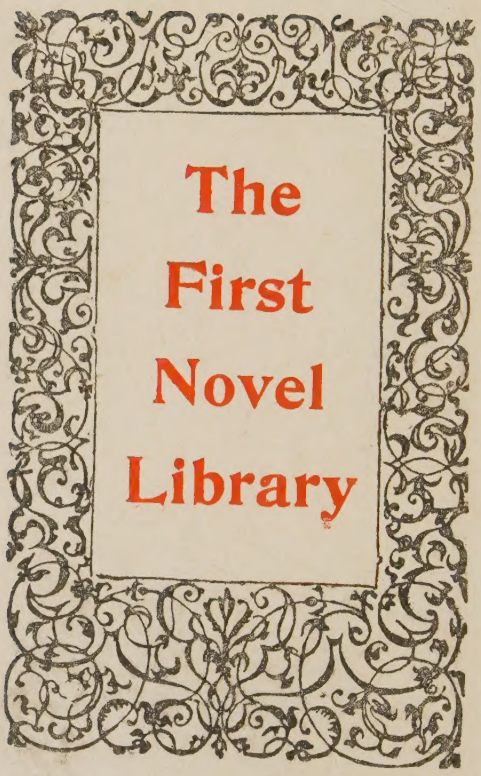
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CATHERINE HERSELF

CHAPTER I

PRELUDE

§ 1

CATHERINE thought: Day is white, Night is black, but sometimes it is half-white and half-black. . . . There were five knobs on the brass rail of the bed: one of them would come off. . . . The baker came to the door every night and said: "And how is Cathie?" . . .

It was cold, and blue flames flickered on top of the coals in the fire-grate. They said: "Lappappappap. . . ." The Man tore off his collar from the stud—"plock"—then he screwed off his boots—"Hr-rooch—flop . . . Hr-rooch—flop." . . . The mother said: "Cathie's asleep: don't make such a noise." . . .

Then her mother carried her past the brown banisters up to bed. . . . It was nearly black. The pumping-engine at the water-works went: "Chug-chug . . . chug-chug . . . chug-chug-chug. . . ."

There were five knobs on the brass rail of the bed. . . .

§ 2

The Man was Father.

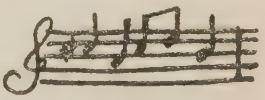
Every morning mother called upstairs: "John: come on! Past eight" . . . and father said: "Just about to." The sun fell in a slant over the table and climbed up the wall. Father ate porridge and milk: he went "Ooflip-oorooflip."

The sunlight slid off the table on to the floor. There was nothing to do except listen to the clock. It went

" tick-tock—tick-tock "—then it went " ticky-ticky." . . . The milkman said: " Mornin', m'm. Lavly mornin'. Thenk you, m'm. Mornin', m'm." . . .

The sunlight ran away. . . .

The face of the man next door had a big bulge. Mother said it was called a goitre. You had them in Derbyshire. The man's name was Jopson. All the street-children used to follow him singing " Old father Jopson "—like this:



There were other fathers besides old father Jopson. There was one whom Catherine had never seen. He was called " Ch-artinevin," but he was not like old father Jopson. . . .

Every night her mother sang:

> Now the day is over,
> Nighties drawing nigh.

and made her talk to our father, Ch-artinevin. Only Ch-artinevin never said anything in reply.

There were two places where little girls went to. One was heaven, the other was hell. Hell was hot, heaven was cold. Heaven was full of white tiles and marble-slabs, like a fish-shop. But hell would be far too hot for you even if you were feeling cold. It would be a pity to go to hell, especially in the warm weather. Sometimes her father said: " O Hell! " . . .

§ 3

Father was an elementary school teacher at the Downlands Road Council School. In winter and on wet nights in summer he sat indoors and put great sprawling ticks and crosses on exercise-books. Sometimes he frowned while he was working: Catherine used to watch him. He was a little man and he wore cycling stockings under

his trousers. Every fine night he put on an old Norfolk tweed jacket and went out into the garden with the two ends of the waistband dangling behind him. He would bend down and make minute examinations of plants. He would twine sweet-pea tendrils round their sticks. Sometimes he would pounce upon a weed and remove it with cruel precision. . . . On Saturday afternoons he took a bucket and went into the roads to collect horse-manure. To Catherine Saturday afternoon was always signalized by the hard scraping of the kitchen shovel on the gritty surface of the roadway.

Mother was big and billowy. She kept her hair in papers during the mornings and wore stays whose ribbed outline showed through the back of her blouse. She talked more than father. At the Duke Street Methodist Chapel she appeared in the front row of the choir, whilst father took round the collection-plate. She was vaguely religious and vaguely patriotic and vaguely sentimental. When she said "John!" very slowly, father knew he had better be careful.

Catherine sat in the front pew on a Sunday morning, and wondered what it was all about. Why had mother got her hat on? . . . Why did everybody come here once a week? What was the man in the round box talking about? Her mother had said, "About God, Cathie." But he didn't say God; he said Gahd. Sometimes Ch-artinevin was mentioned and Catherine caught the words with enthusiasm. It was plain that Ch-artinevin was a well-known personage.

The little boy next to her had curly hair. He was eating peppermints. During the prayer he kept taking them out of his mouth to see if they got smaller. Once he gave her one. It was very nice, but she cracked it during the benediction, and it was a loud crack.

Father stood at the door shaking hands with people. He said: "Good evening, Mrs. Lawson"—"Good evening, Ethel"—"Good evening, Miss Picksley, shall we be seeing you at the Band of Hope on Tuesday?"

And to Catherine he said:

"Go and wait in the back pew; there's a Kermunion." A Kermunion, at any rate, was interesting. . . .

§ 4

Father, being an elementary school-teacher, did not send Catherine to an elementary school. She went to Albany House (principal, Miss Leary, L.R.C.P.). Miss Leary wore her hair in a knob and said to Catherine: "Darling, if you do that again I shall have to smack you hard."

Catherine learnt: Solomon was the wisest man that ever lived; Gibraltar belongs to England; the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; Henry the First never smiled again; three barleycorns one inch; the messenger rushed up to Wolfe saying, "They run, they run!"—"Who run, who run?" cried Wolfe. . . .

On wet winter days the fireguard was hung with steaming clothes. The row of benches was a mere misty vista of wet noses and pocket-handkerchiefs. Everywhere was the stench of damp mackintoshes. Catherine sat by the window and looked through the streaming panes. She could see Polly, who brought them cups of cocoa in the middle of the morning, washing up the breakfast things in the kitchen. Every now and then the water gurgled out of the slopstone into the sink and made Jack, the black retriever dog, cautiously open one eye in his kennel. Catherine liked Jack. He was very staid and solemn, his sole dissipation being the crunching of snails. Miss Leary said: "Catherine, I do declare you are looking out of that window again! How often have I told you . . ." etc., etc.

Every Friday afternoon as a special treat they had reading out of a reading-book. It was not like "Pat sat on the mat: is that Pat's mat?" and the sentences about the cat and rat; it was a real book of adventures, the adventures of a boy and his uncle at the seaside. The avuncular relationship seemed to consist entirely in a readiness to return prompt and plausible answers to all sorts of questions. Uncle Tom and his nephew carried between them a complete outfit of odds and ends, marbles,

pieces of string, oranges, scissors, card-board, cubes and prisms, even jars and glass-funnels, and it was their custom to perform experiments with these upon all suitable occasions, wherever they might chance to be. The observations of passers-by, including park-keepers and bath-chairmen, were not recorded. Local byelaws seemed never to impede them from digging up roots and defacing flower-beds.

§ 5

Day followed on day and Catherine grew. As she walked by the sides of brick walls her eye ran along the lines of mortar tapering into the distance. Even she noticed how she kept rising brick by brick until the mortar-line that her eye followed was somewhere between four and five feet high. She left off her very childish habits, such as walking on the cracks of the pavements. . . . She ceased to ask absurd unanswerable questions about trams and buses ; she stopped lamenting if she failed to secure a window-seat in the train. But she was still a child. She still sang out after old father Jopson.

She discovered that the second line of the hymn was not " Nighties drawing nigh," as she had naturally supposed, but " Night is drawing nigh." The discovery was a disappointment.

She began to read. She read *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Walrus and the Carpenter*. She even began to write. At Albany House she wrote in large copybook style : " Honesty is the best policy." Once also she wrote on the back of a birthday card : " Dear Auntie Ethel, Many Happy Returns of the Day, from Your Affectionate Niece, Catherine." . . . And on the wooden fence at the end of the road she wrote in chalk : " Freddy McKellar is a Soppy Fool."

She began to do naughty things. She played in the game of " last across " ; she hung on to the backs of passing motor-lorries. She danced in the streets to the tune of itinerant barrel-organs. Something may here be said of her appearance. She had hair of a rich and fiery

red, and eyes of a fierce compound of brown and green. In the summer-time her face was freckles all over. She was not good-looking, and few people would have called her even pretty. But she was known everywhere in the vicinity of Kitchener Road as "Cathie Weston, that red-haired girl."

§ 6

In the Co-operative Stores the shopman kept her waiting out of her turn. He had seen her sticking "transfers" on his shop-window and he did not like her. The Bockley and Upton Rising Friendly Co-operative and Industrial Society was an imposing institution with patent bacon-slicers and profuse calendar-distributing habits. Behind the polished mahogany counter the shopman fluttered about, all sleek and dapper, and in front stood Catherine, tired and impatient. There was a large co-operative almanac on the wall, and this she used to peruse diligently, supplementing therefrom the meagre knowledge of English history given her at Albany House. The almanac introduced a sort of miscellaneous historical calendar—for example: September 22nd. Battle of Zutphen, 1586. September 23rd. Massacres in Paris, 1789. Then in great staring red letters: September 24th. Opening of the Head Office of the Bockley and Upton Rising Friendly Co-operative and Industrial Society by Lord Fitzroy, 1903. With absolutely no sense of historical perspective at all, Catherine was quite prepared to believe that the last of these was the most prominent because it was also the most important.

When Kitchener Road was first built, in the full-flood of the Soudanese war-fever, it was for a time drowsily suburban. Then a too enterprising religious organization built a tin-mission at one end of it. The mission had a corrugated iron roof. Until then Kitchener Road had not quite decided whether it would tend in the social sense to rise or to fall. The corrugated iron roof forced a decision. Kitchener Road fell, and fell rapidly. From drowsiness it degenerated into frowsiness. A sleek off-licence appeared, with yellow-glazed tiles and an ungram-

matical notice board: "No beer to be DRANK on the premises NOR on the public highway." Passing the tarred fence at the upper end the pedestrian ran the whole gamut of flippancy and indecency. And on the gate of the corner house could be seen—a final tribute to disappointed hopes—that sultry hall-mark of respectability: "No Hawkers, No Circulars, No Canvassers." When the headmaster of the Downsland Road Council School heard that an intending pupil lived in Kitchener Road, he generally said: "I am very sorry, but we have no more room. If I were you I should try at Cubitt Lane." . . . The headmaster of the Downsland Road Council School did not like the headmaster of the Cubitt Lane Council School. . . . And on all the tram-standards in Bockley a handbill declared that "On July 11th, at the Upton Rising Petty Sessions, Gabriel Handcote, 21, and Richard Moulton, 19, both of Kitchener Road, Bockley, were fined 40s. and costs for travelling on a tramway-car with intent to avoid payment of fare."

§ 7

Bockley was a sprawling urban district on the edge of the metropolitan area. Itself and Upton Rising had spread till they touched like adjacent blobs of ink on blotting-paper. But Upton Rising was aristocratic, plutocratic. . . . Its inhabitants had first-class season-tickets, wore spats, and read *The Times* on the 9.27 "Up." They became district councillors, bazaar-openers, hospital-subscribers and such like. They wrote letters to the *Bockley and Upton Rising Advertiser* complaining of municipal apathy in the matter of water-carts. They said "Bockley must have a park to keep it out of mischief," and lo! Bockley had one, with "keep-off-the-grass" notices and geometrical flower-beds, and a code of byelaws half a yard long, and a constant clientele of old-age pensioners and children flying paper windmills. . . .

And in the meantime Bockley became conscious of its destiny. It bore all the unmistakable signs of a township that expects to be great some day—insurance agencies out

of all proportion to the population, a Carnegie library, and a melancholy statue outside the Town Hall. . . .

The origin of Bockley is simple and unconfusing.

Somewhere early on in the latter half of the nineteenth century the Great Eastern Railway Company, seeking parliamentary sanction to extend its suburban lines to Bockley, was compelled by law to carry workmen to and from Bockley and the City for twopence. . . . It was that twopence which made Bockley. . . .

§ 8

In the front room of No. 24, Kitchener Road there was a Collard and Collard piano. It had jaundiced keys and a bosom of yellow silk interlaced with fretwork. Most of the lower notes said " Hanng-g-g," and the five bottom ones all said the same " hang-g-g." . . . The piano-tuner came. He was of the " ping-ping-wrench " and the " see-what-can-be-done " variety. He said :

" It's bin a good insterment in its time. . . . Pity the dampness got in it."

Catherine watched him as he tightened the wires and predded the notes. At the end he played Thalberg's " Home, Sweet Home," with variations.

That night Mrs. Weston said : " Now that the pianer's bin tuned you might start havin' lessons. . . . I'll see Mr. Monkhouse about it to-morrer."

And Catherine bought a shilling instruction book and learned : E G B D F—Every Good Boy Deserves Favour. . . .

Mr. Monkhouse was a versatile man. In the *Bockley Advertiser* he announced : " Mr. Reginald Monkhouse has still a few dates vacant during April and May for engagements as entertainer, expert conjurer, pianist, accompanist or children's lecturer Write Box 77." At Masonic dinners Mr. Monkhouse sang " Where did you get that hat ? " and other relics of the Victorian music-hall stage. Every evening from 8 till 11 he played the piano and conducted the orchestra at the Victoria Hall, Bockley, vamping with his left hand and beatin ¡ time with the first finger of his

right. And on Saturdays and at odd times whenever possible he gave pianoforte tuition at the rate of sixpence a lesson. . . . He was always shabbily-dressed, always good-humoured, patient and not too conscientious. The little front parlour where he lodged in Cubitt Lane was full of playbills and concert programmes and signed menu-cards. . . .

He gave Catherine a piece called " White Wings," and initiated her into a few elementary five-finger exercises. She was not particularly apt in picking them up, but at the end of forty-five minutes he said :

" Good-night, my dear. You'll be a female Paderewski before long. . . ."

Those were the days when a pianist had achieved the signal distinction of becoming known to the man-in-the-street. Paderewski was as well known as Krüger.

§ 9

Freddie McKellar and Catherine Weston were seated side by side in the back bench of the Duke Street School-room. The occasion was a Band of Hope entertainment. Mr. Weston was on the platform, surrounded by weird articles of glass and metal.

" I want you all to notice carefully," he said. " Here I have a jar of clean pure water. The little fellow who is gambolling about so playfully inside it is a stickleback. He is having a fine time because the water is so pure and fresh. . . . Now watch . . . here I have a flask of whisky. . . . I pour it into the water . . . so. . . . I want you to watch very carefully. . . ."

Freddie McKellar, aged fifteen, bent his head slightly to the left in order to see round the corner of Mrs. Mole's hat. In doing so he felt the soft spray-like touch of Catherine's hair against his ear. . . . It was not unpleasant.

Catherine was dreamily conscious that something tense was going to happen.

" It doesn't always work," she whispered, vaguely, " some sticklebacks like it." . . . She bent her head slightly to the right to circumvent the obstruction of Mr.

Mole's shiny hairless head. To Freddie McKellar it seemed that this time, instead of his ear touching her hair, her hair had performed the more positive act of brushing against his ear. The difference, though subtle, was not to be ignored.

" Now," cried Mr. Weston, brandishing aloft his jar with the stickleback inside it either dead or drunk or in some way incapacitated for further movement, " if the effect of this foul spirit upon this tiny animal is . . ."

" There's refreshments afterwards, ain't there ? " said Freddie, *sotto voce.*

" Yes," she whispered, hoarsely. The tragedy of the dying stickleback, " butchered to make a Roman holiday," had made her unwontedly solemn.

. . . " Now," proceeded Mr. Weston, " if somebody will kindly lower the lights, I will show you on the screen some of the effects of strong drink. . . . First of all, perhaps you would care to have a look at a drop of whisky as it is seen through the lens of a microscope. . . ."

The lights went out in successive " pops."

Freddie McKellar's left hand slowly closed over Catherine's right one.

" Ugh," said Catherine, presumably at the horrible picture on the screen. Then the thought came to her (she had had no experience of such matters)—" He must be flirting with me."

Simultaneously there came to Freddie McKellar (who, for his age, had had considerable experience of such matters) the thought : " She must be flirting with me."

And at the same time Gladys Stockwell nudged Bessie Millar and whispered : " Just look at Cathie Weston and Freddie McKellar . . . at their age, too. . . ." (Gladys was twenty-three and unbeautiful.)

In the refreshment room afterwards Catherine and Freddie sat together on a bench munching ham-sandwiches. You were only expected to take one ham-sandwich, but Catherine had already taken three and Freddie five. The caretaker was stoking up the fire at the other side of the room.

" Ain't you two goin' ter join in the Musical Chairs ? " he remarked, contemplatively, " they've started 'em in the other room."

Freddie took another ham-sandwich.

" I don't feel extra like Musical Chairs," he replied.

The caretaker grinned and shuffled out with the empty coke-scuttle. It was precisely at that moment that Catherine began to dislike the scent of Freddie's lavishly spread hair-oil. . . .

Catherine thought : " I don't think I like him at all. I wonder if he knows it was me who chalked up on the fence, ' Freddie McKellar is a soppy fool.' . . . 'Cos he is one, really. . . ."

And then suddenly Freddie had an unfortunate inspiration.

He put his arm round her neck and touched her cheek. In an instant she was up and flaring and standing before him.

" What on earth did you do that for ? " she cried, passionately ; " I don't want your smelly fingers on me ! " (" Smelly fingers " was an attribute she bestowed on everybody she disliked.)

He was astonished at her vehemence, but tried to carry it off laughingly.

" Come back," he called, advancing to her, " and don't be silly . . . silly . . . don't be . . . silly. . . ." He was rather nervous. His nervousness made him desperate.

There occurred a somewhat unseemly fracas. He stood before the door and slowly got her trapped into a corner. She aimed a tea-cup at him but missed. Maddened by this he rushed full tilt at her. She struggled, snatched, tore, kicked, pinched. She was stronger than he, but he got hold of her hair, and so held her at his mercy. He just managed to kiss her. She spat in his face. Then he let her go. She marched out of the room, seizing another tea-cup as she went. When she was at the door she took a careful aim and flung it at him with all her might. It struck his head. There was that tense pause just after

children are hurt, and just before they begin to cry. Then he broke into a wail. . . . Most dramatically the piano in the next room stopped, and there was the scuffle of finding chairs. . . . She paused at the door and tossed her last words at him in uttermost scorn.

" Oh, you great big softie . . . " she said, and passed out into the cool night air.

She never enquired whether he were seriously hurt (he might have been) ; she never stopped to think of the broken crockery on the floor or her own red hair streaming in disarray ; at that moment she would not have cared if she had killed him.

And she never spoke to him again. . . .

Afterwards she was doubly angry with him because he had made her lose her temper. . . .

§ 10

Mrs. Weston said : " Jus' look at your hair ! You've bin larking abeaout, I darebebound."

Catherine did not contradict her. " Larking about " was a punishable misdemeanour.

" Everybody was larking about," she put in, irrelevantly.

" You're a disgrace," continued Mrs. Weston, equally irrelevantly. Then as an afterthought : " Larking about with the boys, I daresay. . . ."

Catherine did not reply.

" Well, you're going to have a sound thrashing, that's all, so you may as well know. . . . I'm about sick of your hooligan ways. . . ."

Catherine went white. She was not afraid of a sound thrashing (they were not very fearsome things when you got used to them) ; it was the atmosphere of strained expectancy that was almost intolerable. She went whiter when her mother said :

" Have your supper first. . . . There's some cold rice pudding. . . ."

She ate in silence. Her mother was rushing in and out of the scullery preparing her father's supper. In the middle of all this her father entered. He was tired and

hoarse after the evening's effort. He noticed the strained atmosphere. He said to Catherine :

" What's the matter, Cathie ? "

Mrs. Weston began to talk very fast and very harshly. Her voice was like the sudden rending of a strip of calico.

" She's bin behaving herself badly again, that's what's amiss with her. . . . Larking about all this evening, she was. A regular disgrace. I tell you, I'm not going to put up with it. She's going to get a sound thrashing to teach her to remember. . . ."

Simultaneously Mrs. Weston planked down a plate of greens and vegetables in front of her husband. He attacked them nervously.

" It's not good enough," he said, after a pause, with the air of being vaguely reproachful against nobody in particular, " I tell you it's not good enough. . . . I don't know why these things should happen. It's not as if she was a little girl. . . ."

That was all he said.

The sound thrashing began soon afterwards. It was an extremely unscientific battery of slaps, in which Catherine dodged as best she could amongst the crowded furniture of the kitchen. Once she lurched against the table and knocked over the vinegar-bottle.

" I wish you wouldn't . . ." began Mr. Weston, and then stopped and continued eating.

After some moments of this gymnastic display both parties were hot and flushed with exertion, and the finale began when Mrs. Weston opened the door of the lobby and manœuvred Catherine out of the kitchen.

" Off you go," she said. " Straight to bed . . . str-h-aight to b-bed. . . ."

The chase proceeded upstairs. Mrs. Weston's stertorous breathing and heavy footfalls were the most conspicuous sounds. . . . A few seconds afterwards a loud banging of an upstairs door announced that hostilities were over.

In her tiny back bedroom Catherine sat down on a chair for breath. She was not physically hurt ; in her " larking about " with boys and girls of her own age she had often

paused for breath like this, and at such times there had been joy in her heart even when there had been pain in her body. But now she was conscious only of profound indignity. Her father's vague protest echoed in her memory: "It's not as if she were a little girl. . . ."

She undressed and got into bed. It was quite dark, and she felt acutely miserable. Far away the pumping engine at the water-works whispered, as it always did at night-time, "Chug-chug . . . chug-chug . . . chug-chug-chug. . . ." Ten, twelve years had passed since she had counted the five knobs on the brass rail of the bed. She was growing up, out of a child into a girl. She was not growing up without faults: she knew that. The worst trait in her was temper . . . she would have to conquer that. She must learn self-control. . . .

From below came the old familiar sound of her father taking off his boots and dumping them under the sofa. "H-rooch-flop . . . h'rooch-flop." . . . That sound was bound up with all her memories of childhood.

Ten minutes later there came a cautious tap at her door, and her father entered in an intermediate stage of attire. He lit a candle clumsily and shone it down upon her. She did not move. He prodded her with his thumb in a vague, experimental way. She made no reply, though her eyes were wide open and staring into his.

"I say, Cathie," he began, vaguely and nervously, "you've bin misbehaving, I'm told. . . . It's too bad, you know. . . . Come now . . . be a good girl and go to sleep."

Pause.

Then: "Kiss me."

It was the first time for many years that he had asked for such a thing. With no apparent reason at all the tears welled up into her eyes, tears that she had hidden since her tenth birthday.

She was just about to raise her head to meet his when a drop of liquid candle grease fell on her bare arm. The sharp, unexpected pain made her a prey to a sudden gust of tempestuous emotion. . . .

"Oh, go away," she muttered angrily, "don't come bothering me . . . I'm tired. . . ." She crouched down beneath the bedclothes with her face turned away from him.

Mr. Weston retired a little sheepishly.

"Oh, well," he said, "if you're going to be sulky . . . I suppose. . . ."

When he had gone she cried as she had never cried before, and all because she had spurned his proffered reconciliation. From the other side of the thin partition that separated the two rooms, she could hear the sharp "plock" as her father wrenched his collar off the stud, and the steady nasal monotone of her mother's voice. She could not discern any words, but from the vicious way in which her father kept stumbling up against things she guessed that they were quarrelling. . . .

CHAPTER II

JEUNESSE

§ 1

CATHERINE won an open scholarship to the Upton Rising High School for Girls. She did not win it because of any particular brilliance or erudition in her examination papers ; she won it, as a matter of fact, because Mr. McGill, one of the Governors, happened to remark to Miss Forsdyke, the headmistress : " I hear Weston's got his daughter in for a scholarship."

Miss Forsdyke said, " Weston ?—Weston ?—Let me see —I believe I've heard the name somewhere . . . Er . . . who is he ? "

" One of the men at the Downsland Road School. . . . Not a bad sort. . . . I bet old Clotters'll be mad if Weston's girl gets anything. Clotters' boy missed last year. . . ."

Now Clotters was the headmaster of the Downsland Road Council School. Mr. Weston did not like Mr. Clotters. . . . Mr. McGill did not like Mr. Clotters. . . . And even Miss Forsdyke did not like Mr. Clotters. . . .

Thus it happened that Catherine obtained a scholarship to the Upton Rising High School for Girls.

In her English paper she was asked to analyse : " There is a tide in the affairs of men. . . ." She began :

" There "—subject ; " is " predicate ; " a tide " object —according to a well-established form of procedure which sometimes enabled her to get her analysis right without in the least understanding what she was about.

And in her Scripture paper she was asked : What is a phylactery ? She answered : a kind of musical instrument.

Catherine was rather surprised to get a scholarship.

§ 2

Long lingering September evenings with the sun splashing over the roofs of Upton Rising; the soft scented dusk creeping through gravelled roads; tier upon tier of houses astride the hill, with every window like a crimson star. . . . In the high road the newsboys were calling, the trams swirled citywards like golden meteors flying through space. . . . In the quiet residential roads was always the chatter of the lawn-mower, the drowsy murmur of hedge-clipping. . . . In these delectable hours of twilight Catherine passed from Upton Rising into Bockley. . . . Every night she passed, with swollen satchel under her arm—Luke's Grove, over Makepiece Common, then along the Ridegway into the Bockley High Street. . . . And from the High Street into Kitchener Road there was a bewildering choice of routes, differing only in degrees of frowsiness. . . .

Men passed her by like dim shadows heralded by the glowing tips of their cigarettes. . . .

The policeman on point-duty in the Bockley High Street knew her. He said, "'d evenin', miss," and Catherine and the other girls who accompanied her on her way home used to giggle hysterically, for he was tall and handsome and presumably young.

Catherine went home with Madge Saunders and Helen Trant. Madge was fat, good-natured, but lymphatic and uninteresting. Her father was on the council and kept a big drapery stores in the High Street. He called his daughter "Maggers," and was excessively jovial and contented. When Catherine went to tea at the Saunders', he called her "Carrots." His humour was exhausted in the invention of nicknames. . . .

Helen Trant was almost the antithesis of Catherine and equally of Madge. She was quiet, undemonstrative, but her quietness was not the quietness of laziness. She worked hard, was moderately clever, almost excessively conscientious, and in a quiet, unobtrusive way immensely powerful and self-reliant. She was a scholarship girl, and her father was in a good position in a London Insurance Office.

Neither Madge nor Helen was good-looking, but Helen had a quiet dignity that made a fair substitute for beauty. . . . They were a rather distinctive trio as they sauntered home together.

As they passed the policeman on point-duty Catherine made provocative eyes at him. Madge rolled into heavy, undisciplined laughter. And Helen sometimes smiled, but when she did it was the smile as of one who knew all about policemen, their lives, wages, conditions of existence, their baulked aspirations, confident hopes and undying ambitions. . . . She looked to have the sympathy of one who knows everything without being told anything. . . .

Miss Forsdyke, in a spiteful mood, said :

" I wish, Helen, you would be more particular in your choice of companions. . ."

Yet Catherine and Helen became close friends, and Madge was merely an adjunct to their evening journeys home. . . .

§ 3

Time was passing ; Catherine was creeping through her teens, and every night in the drawing-room at 24, Kitchener Road the piano strummed for exactly one hour, and then stopped. By and by the music-lover might have begun to detect certain tunes that were familiar to him. A few of Mendelssohn's " Songs Without Words," Tchaikovski's " Valse Triste," the adagio part of Beethoven's " Pathetic Sonata." . . .

Once, too, a prelude of Chopin's, chosen for its unChopin-like qualities. . . .

There came a day when Catherine's playing began to be very slightly superior to the instrument at her disposal. Nor did the latter improve as time passed. All the lower notes responded with a nasal twang reminiscent of a Jew's-harp. The upper ones were so physically inert that when pushed down they refused to come up again without assistance, and so unanimous as to pitch that the striking of the wrong note was no more inharmonious than the striking of the right one. . . .

Yet it was on this instrument that Catherine practised a certain Fantasia in D Minor of Mozart's that won her a first prize at the Upton Rising Annual Eisteddfod. . . . The examiner was a wizened old man with blue spectacles. From the first he annoyed Catherine. Her music persisted in curling up.

"You should use a flat case," he said, "not one of these roll ones."

Then she discovered that the middle page of the music was not there. Presumably she had left it in the waiting-room.

"You can't go and fetch it," he said. "I think you're very careless. . . ."

"Do you?" she answered impudently. "Then I'll play from memory."

"You ought not to play from memory . . . at your age . . ." he protested.

Nevertheless she did so, and played better than she had ever played at her practices. It was partly the ecstasy of manipulating a splendid instrument, partly a reckless desire to defy and confute this old man.

"H'm . . ." he said, when she had finished. He bore her no malice for her carelessness or impudence, he simply judged her fairly, totted up her marks, and discovered them to be higher than the rest. . . . Accordingly he adjudged her the winner. He looked neither pleased nor sorry.

Catherine decided that he was utterly soulless. . . .

§ 4

On a certain Monday morning Catherine and Helen took a day off from school, and went picnicing in Epping Forest. Helen's brother George was with them, and also a friend of the latter's, one Bert, who took over the financial management of the outing with marked efficiency, but was otherwise vague and indeterminate. George was a moderately good-looking fellow of nineteen, clever in a restricted kind of way, and very entertaining when the mood was upon him. He worked for a City firm of accountants, and was taking his annual fortnight's holiday.

It was very pleasant to be strolling up the hill leading to High Beech at ten o'clock on a fresh April morning. The party inevitably split up into couples. Bert was walking on in front with Helen; George and Catherine formed up the rear. There was a wonderful atmosphere of serenity over everything: not a soul was about save themselves; the hotels and refreshment châteaux seemed scarcely to have wakened out of their winter's sleep. And overhead the sky was pure blue. . . . Up the steep, gritty road they trudged, and in the hearts of each of them something seemed to be singing: "We are going to have a glorious day."

Bert was saying to Helen: "Yes, of course they're very nice and comfortable and all that, I know, but they fairly eat up the petrol. . . . Can't possibly run them on less than . . ."

"Indeed?" said Helen, sympathetically.

And a hundred yards behind them George was saying to Catherine: "I suppose woman is a few inches nearer to mother earth than man. . . . She is more . . . primal . . . no, not exactly that. . . . I mean elemental . . . that's the word, I think. . . ."

"She's got more common sense, if that's what you mean. . . ."

"No, I don't mean exactly that. . . . Besides, is common sense such a virtue? . . . The great things of the world have been done as a rule by people with uncommon sense. . . . No, I mean this: woman seems to know by instinct what man only learns by patient study and not always then. . . . Isn't that your experience?"

"I don't think I've had any experience."

"H'm! . . . the others are waiting for us at the top. I suppose they want to know what we're going to do. . . ."

They quickened their steps to the summit.

§ 5

They chose for lunch a quiet spot hemmed in by ferns and bushes. Catherine's spirits soared higher and higher as the hours flew. . . . The sun was splashing over the

hills as they came upon the red roofs of Chingford. The quantity of feeble, flippant conversation that passed amongst them was colossal. But they had had a glorious day. . . .

" I'll see you home," said George, as they entered the straggling outskirts of Bockley.

" Please don't," replied Catherine. " It's quite out of your way."

" I assure you . . ." he began.

" Please . . ." she reiterated. The truth was she did not wish her mother to see her in the company of a young man.

Amidst the winedark fragrance of an April evening they passed until they reached the corner of the road where the Trants lived. They stopped talking here for three-quarters of an hour, and then said good-bye. At the last minute George said :

" By the way, I've got to call in at a shop in the High Street to see about something, so I may as well walk back part of the way with you."

Catherine blushed, but the darkness shielded her.

" The shops'll be shut by this time," said Helen, quietly.

" Er . . . not . . . er . . . the shop *I* mean," replied George.

He walked back with Catherine as far as the corner of High Street and the Ridgeway. Their talk was rather vaguely, indefinitely sentimental. Twice he quoted from Swinburne and once from Omar Khayyám.

As they descended the hill Catherine took off her tam-o'-shanter hat and stuffed it in her pocket. The soft night breeze blew her hair like a dim cloud behind her. . . .

They shook hands in the dark interval between two brilliantly lighted shop-windows.

" My God," he whispered softly, " your hair ! "

He brushed it lightly with his hand.

" What about it ? " she said, and her voice was nearly as soft as his.

" Passionate," he cried ; " like flame . . . flame . . good-night. . . ."

He fled into the dark vista of a side-street.

§ 6

The clock on the Carnegie library said, Ten minutes past ten. Catherine thought, Now for a big row at home. . . .

She had been forbidden to come in later than nine o'clock.

" When *I* was young . . ." her mother had said.

And her father had argued: " I can't see what you need ever to be out later than nine for. . . . You've got all the daytime, surely you don't need the night as well. . . . I can't understand. . . . It's not as if we didn't let you do what you like on Saturday afternoons. . . ."

She put her hat on as she turned into Kitchener Road. She sauntered slowly to No. 24. A minute or two won't make much difference, she reasoned, on top of an hour and a quarter. The crowded memories of the day just past, coupled with anticipation of a domestic fracas when she got home, combined to make her somewhat excited. The day had been so full of incident that she would have enjoyed walking the cool streets till midnight, reckoning things out and sizing them according to their relative importance.

Then she recollected it was Monday night. Her father would be at night-school; he did not usually arrive home till half-past ten.

The street-lamp in front of No. 24 revealed the interesting fact that the blinds in the front parlour were drawn. There was no light behind them, but the tiny gas-jet in the hall was burning; she could see its beam through the fanlight. Her heart leaped within her. She felt like a prisoner granted a reprieve. . . . There were visitors. That seemed certain. Somebody had come to spend the evening, and her mother had " put a light in the front room," the highest mark of respect known. Now probably they were all having supper in the kitchen. The hall-light, too, pointed to that conclusion, for ever since Mr. Tuppinger took the wrong hat from the hall-stand, and failed to discover his mistake afterwards, Mrs. Weston had made it a rule that the hall should be illuminated when visitors came Catherine knocked at the door. . . .

This was really lucky. With good fortune the lateness of the hour might not be noticed: at any rate the fracas would be postponed. Also there would be a good supper awaiting her. . . . Cold beetroot; perhaps even stewed prunes and custard. . . .

A strange woman came to the door. Catherine did not know her name, but she recognized her as someone who lived "up the road," and who used to push in front of her when she was a little girl at the co-operative stores.

"Is it Cathie?" said the strange woman.

"Yes," replied Catherine.

"Come inside," answered the strange woman, with peculiar solemnity. Then she went on, like the intoning of a chant:

"Your mother is not well . . . in fact . . . she's had an accident . . . in the street . . . in fact . . . *do* come inside . . . in fact. . . ."

In fact, Mrs. Weston was dead.

§ 7

Mrs. Weston had been out shopping during the evening. In the crowded part of the High Street she had been knocked down by a bicycle. She had fallen upon her face, but had not apparently received much hurt, for after having a cut attended to at the chemist's, she went home unattended. But at the very door of her house in Kitchener Road, something went "snap" inside her head; she collapsed and fell all in a heap on the doorstep. She was putting the key in the lock when this happened, and the key was found in the lock when neighbours came to her assistance. They carried her in the front room (where the Collard and Collard piano was) and laid her down on the sofa. She uttered vague scraps of conversation for some moments: then she died. . . .

When Catherine went in to look at her she could not help thinking how death had made her look ridiculous. She was lying under the window, and the lamp in the middle of the ceiling threw her features into heavy shadow. There was a piece of sticking-plaster over the cut on her

forehead, and her chin was bruised as well. The most prominent of her front teeth had broken off half-way, and as, seemingly, she had died gasping for breath, her mouth was wide open. The massive, almost masculine jaws hung unsymmetrically: there was no beauty or calm in her last attitude. She looked as if she had died fighting. An aperture in the drawn venetian blinds allowed a slit of pale light from the street lamp outside to cross her face diagonally, making it appear more grotesque than ever. Catherine could scarcely believe it was her mother. She had the old workaday blouse on, because she had gone out shopping in a mackintosh and had thought it would not show underneath. Catherine could not help thinking how ashamed her mother would have been at the thought of being seen in this blouse by all the neighbours, and especially to have had the neighbours crowding in her own drawing-room with all the cheap bamboo furniture and the faded carpet, and the "Present from Margate" on the mantelpiece, and the certificate on the wall certifying that John Weston, aged twelve, had achieved merit in writing an essay on "Alcohol and its Effects on the Human Body." (This latter would have been removed long since, had it not successfully covered up a hole in the wallpaper.) . . . Catherine felt sure that if her mother had known she was going to die, she would have dressed up for the occasion. But it had come upon her unexpectedly. There she was, with her shabby blouse and her ghastly face, and her mackintosh and string-bag on the chair beside her. There was some tea in the bag, and her fall had burst the paper wrapper, for the latter was half-full, and there were tea grains about the floor. . . .

Mr. Weston had been sent for. He came in tired after a tiresome day, plus the usual Monday feeling of discontent. He was in a bad temper.

"Hell!" he muttered, as he bashed his shins against the piano in the gloom. "These blinds . . ." he began, and checked himself.

He seemed annoyed that she had done such a dramatic, unexpected thing. He was annoyed that there was no

supper ready for him. "You might have got me a cup of tea ready," he said to Catherine. Then he tried to be conventional. "She was a good woman," he said, as if it had just occurred to him.

When the strange woman had departed, and Catherine and he were sitting down in the kitchen to a frugal supper, he began the conversation again.

"By the way," he said, "apparently you didn't go to school to-day. Mrs. Jopson thought you'd be staying to the evening-class, and sent a message to the school to fetch you. Miss Forsdyke said you hadn't been present at all to-day. . . . Is that so?"

"I didn't go to-day," admitted Catherine.

"Where did you go?"

"We . . . took a day off . . . picnicing in the Forest . . . it seemed such a fine day. . . ."

"Who's we?"

"Helen and . . . and . . . me."

"Are you in the habit of taking days off like that?"

"Oh no. . . . It's the first time we've ever done it."

There was a pause.

"You know," he went on protestingly, "this sort of thing's not good enough, Catherine. . . . You ought to see that this sort of thing can't go on . . . it's too bad of you . . . running off to play truant . . . and on the very day that . . . that your mother . . ."

"How on earth could I——" she began hastily, and then stopped, for she saw that big tears were rolling down both his cheeks.

"Not good enough," he kept muttering, vaguely reproachful.

Then later on he reopened the question.

"I suppose—er—you and Helen were the only people at the picnic?"

"No—there were two others."

"Girls, I suppose?"

"No."

"Not young men, I hope?"

"Yes, one of them was Helen's brother. The other was a friend of his. . . ."

For a few moments he was very thoughtful. Then he continued:

"I don't think you ought to have gone with them, Catherine . . . at your age, you know. . . . Besides, you've plenty of girl friends—I can't think what you want with young men and boys. . . . Girls should stick to girls. . . ."

"But surely, Father——"

"If you want friends, let them be girl friends . . . surely you can find plenty of your own sex without——"

Catherine could think of no adequate answer to this argument, so she bade him good-night and went upstairs to bed. . . .

§ 8

In the little back bedroom she sat down on the bed and tried to gather her wits. She was overwhelmed by a feeling of physical weariness: that was not surprising, for she had walked perhaps fifteen miles that day. In the candle-light she saw her face in the mirror: she was surprised to find herself almost ashen pale. Her red hair floated cloud-like around her head: in the little hand-mirror there was not room to see all of it at once. But it was still flying as if in the wind, and it was gorgeously wild and untamed. . . .

"My God," George Trant had said, "your hair!" . . .

. . . Catherine was surprised, almost shocked that she had as yet shed no tears for her mother. It seemed such a brutally callous piece of negligence, and Catherine was sure she was neither brutal nor callous. . . . Yet tears would not come.

She undressed and got into bed. . . .

The pumping-engine at the water-works went on at its patient chug-chugging, and forthwith a myriad memories of childhood came back to her. . . . She could feel the tears welling up into her eyes, and then she realized that it was sentiment and not grief that was affecting her. She

would not weep for sentiment, like the heroines in the sixpenny novels that Madge Saunders read.

Ever and anon the whisper came echoing through her mind: "My God . . . your hair!" . . .

From the very insistence of her thoughts she could not fall asleep until morning was well advanced, but when she did, her sleep was calm and dreamless. . . .

§ 9

Of course there was a splendid funeral. It was infinitely more gorgeous than anything that had taken place in Mrs. Weston's lifetime. Relatives were summoned to attend the obsequies, relatives that Catherine had never seen and had not known existed, relatives with black ties and rubicund faces and Cockney accents, and that deplorable foreign flavour that comes of dwelling in another London suburb. They all gathered together in the drab little front room amongst the bamboo furniture, and gazed curiously at Catherine. Evidently she did not quite realize their ideal of a bereaved daughter. They were all a trifle nervous of the undertaker. Finally, they were all squashed into four black coaches and driven slowly to the cemetery behind a glass hearse. In front of the horses walked two men, each bearing what appeared to be a mace.

The day was chilly and sprinkled with April showers; the mourners in the first coach (in which was Catherine) insisted on having all the windows closed, until the rain-washed panes were dim with the reek of their breaths. They carried their pocket-handkerchiefs in their hands, and spoke in tremulous murmurs. . . . The cavalcade swept on, through the dreariest and frowsiest streets in all Bockley, out on to the murky highways where the mud splashes from passing motor-buses reached the tops of the window-panes. Then past the Town Hall, magnificently impeding traffic as they crossed the tram-lines at the Ridgeway corner, on to the outer fringes of the town, where public-houses and tin-missions indulged in melancholy stares at one another across cat-haunted waste land. A slow progress past an avenue of cars at the tram ter-

minus, and at last to the gates of a pretentious but infinitely dismal burial-ground. The latter was owned and run on business lines by a limited liability company, and for many years it had paid twelve per cent. on its ordinary shares. That dying was a profitable industry could be seen from the great gates, opening far back from the road, with their ornate metal-work representing winged angels.

As they left the coaches a shower began. They walked about a quarter of a mile amongst a welter of acrobatic angels, broken columns and miscellaneous statuary ; then they reached the grave. The rain plashed dismally on the pile of brown earth by the side, and everybody stood on the brink with a precarious footing on the sodden soil. There was a diminutive Methodist parson with a bad cold, who coughed at every comma in the burial-service and sneezed into the grave at the end of each verse. All around them was the litter of gravediggers' tools, faded flowers and wreath-skeletons. Catherine thought it by far the most depressing business she had ever come across. Her father scattered a handful of cold, clammy mud on top of the coffin, and everybody (especially the bald-headed men with their hats off) seemed eager to get back to the fetid warmth of the coaches. . . . So back went the procession, down the long cemetery avenue, with nothing in sight save untidy vistas of unsymmetrical gravestones, back into the steaming coaches, home again through the mud and rain to Kitchener Road. The carriages reeked with the smell of wet kid gloves and damp mackintoshes. In the Bockley High Street they passed a crowd round a street accident. A motor-bus had skidded into a tramway standard, and there were mud-splashed, white-painted ambulances in attendance. Mr. Weston rubbed the vapour off the window with his hand. "Some poor devil," he muttered, and there was a whole world of humanity in his voice. And Catherine felt that nothing in death itself was half so terrible as the dismal fuss that people make over it.

When the carriages arrived back at No. 24, Kitchener Road, and everybody went into the house, they found that

the fire in the front room had gone out. Half an hour was spent in trying to relight it with damp coal and damp firewood and damp newspaper. Mr. Weston held up the *Bockley and District Advertiser* to make a draught. The newspaper caught alight and fell back on to the carpet, whereupon Mr. Weston danced a sort of dervish cake-walk to stamp it out. This acrobatic performance exercised a stimulating effect upon the visitors, who became conversational. In a moment of riotous abandon Mr. Weston directed Catherine to run over to the co-operative stores and purchase two small tins of lobster and one large tin of pineapple chunks. . . .

About ten minutes to midnight, when all the mourners had departed, and Catherine was pulling down the blinds in the back bedroom, her father came up and sat down on the end of the bed unlacing his boots.

" You know, Cathie," he began, nervously, as if there were something he wished to get off his mind, " this business is so . . . so . . . so sudden. . . . That's what's the matter with it. It don't give a chap time to gather his wits. . . . Last week *she* was here. Fussing about and rushing round and seemingly in the best of health. And this week—dead an' buried. . . . Bit of a shock, isn't it ? "

She did not answer. He continued in a spurt:

" You know there's a sort of way in which you miss anybody you've been used to seeing about the place for years an' years. Without any . . . er . . . what people call love, you know, or anything of that sort. . . . Well, I miss your mother in that way. Quite apart from any other way, I mean. . . . If she was here now she'd nag at me for not taking my dirty boots off downstairs. It's funny, but I shall miss all that nagging. I got used to it. I didn't particularly like it, but things'll seem pretty dull for a time without it. . . ."

Pause.

" For twenty years I've chucked my dirty boots under the sofa downstairs, and wouldn't have dreamt of bringing them up here. . . . And now the first night she's laid to

rest I come up here with 'em on without thinkin' about it. . . ."

He kept on making vague remarks.

" Life's passing, Cathie . . . one thing an' then another. . . . Time waits for no man—or woman. . . . We're like those clocks at the railway stations. . . . We seem not to be moving and then we fall forward with a jerk at the end of the minute. . . . It's easy to notice the jerks . . . but time goes steadily on whether we notice it or not. . . ."

Then he changed the subject.

" It's lucky for you it wasn't an ordinary night last Monday, or you'd have got in a fine row, I can tell you. Playing truant and going out with young fellers. . . . A girl of your age ought not to bother her head with fellers. . . . I never knew your mother till she was twenty-two. . . . This sort of free-and-easy-carrying-on won't do, Catherine. For one thing it's not respectable. And for another thing it's not right. . . . Find some girl friends to go out with, and leave the fellers alone. . . ."

" Fellers," he called them. The word jarred on her.

CHAPTER III

THE FIRST TRANT EPISODE

§ 1

JUNE sunlight was scorching the tarred asphalt of the Ridgeway, and Catherine and Helen were sauntering homewards beneath the heavy trees. Their conversation savoured of "shop."

"Two hours the last map took me," said Catherine, indignantly, "and we've got another in less than a fortnight. . . . Rivers and mountains as well. . . . And it isn't as if North America was easy, either . . . there's all those lakes. . . ."

"I shan't put in those islands at the top, anyway," observed Helen.

"I shall leave mine till to-morrow morning," continued Catherine. "That is, if I do it at all. . . . And I shall do it on typewriting paper so I can trace it."

"She won't take it if you do."

"She'll have to. . . ."

At the corner of the Post Office the conversation took a personal turn.

"We're having a social at the Baptist Church next Saturday. Will you come?" asked Helen (Helen attended a rather prosperous Baptist establishment in Upton Rising).

Catherine walked on for some moments before answering. She seemed to be weighing things up.

"I might," she answered. Then, as an afterthought, she added: "I suppose you'll all be there?"

"Oh yes. There'll be me and father and mother and Millie, perhaps the Lester girls as well. . . ."

"George?" Catherine's voice rather overdid itself in the effort to appear casual. Helen looked at her keenly.

"Possibly," she replied, in a voice that might have meant anything. There came a rather curious pause. They had reached the corner of the High Street before Helen spoke again.

"So *that's* it, is it?" she remarked, as they crossed the tramway junction.

"That's *what?*" said Catherine gruffly.

"That's what's been making you so . . . so different—lately. . . . I'd been wondering what it was. I never guessed it was George."

"How did you find out?"

"I didn't find out. You just told me."

Catherine turned down Hanson Street, the road immediately opposite the Ridgeway.

"Let's go down here," she suggested. "It's quieter. I can see you've a lot to say to me."

Helen took her arm.

"No, I haven't. . . . I don't know that I can say anything, really. . . . Only I think you're silly."

"Why?" The word rang out like a pistol-shot.

The reply did not come immediately. When it did it sounded limp and uncertain.

"Because . . . because you'll be disappointed in him."

"What's the matter with him, then?"

"Nothing much. He's all right . . . only . . . he'll disappoint you, one way or another. He's not as clever as he seems. Besides——"

"Yes?"

"He doesn't like you."

"He *doesn't?* Has he told you so?"

"Not in so many words. But I know. He may like you to flirt with, but he doesn't like *you*. My advice is, if you're getting serious, give up the flirting. With him, at any rate. . . . After all, you can always find plenty of chaps to flirt about with. . . ."

(Her father had said "fellers." She said "chaps"!)

"But I don't want them, maybe."

"Well, go without them, then." (They were at the corner of Kitchener Road.) . . . "I never thought much of flirting about as a pastime."

It was a curiously eliptical conversation throughout, and at the gate of No. 24 they both seemed eager not to prolong it by standing. They said good-bye immediately, and both were conscious of electricity in the atmosphere.

That evening Catherine found herself unable to concentrate on homework. Mr. Weston was out at night-school, and she was thus left alone in the house. The nine o'clock rule was now virtually inoperative, since her father did not return till half-past ten on three nights out of the week. At about ten past nine Catherine put aside her books and went out for a walk. She had finished all her work excepting the map.

Cubitt Lane at this time on a glorious June evening was full of courting couples. They lurched along in a peculiarly graceless fashion, each leaning against the other.

"I wouldn't do *that*," thought Catherine, virtuously. "That *is* silly, if you like."

At the bridge over the railway she heard a brisk "good evening" addressed to herself. She turned and saw it was George Trant. . . .

"Where're you off to?" he asked good-humouredly.

"Taking a walk."

"So'm I. . . . Let's go up the road. . . ."

"All right." . . . They climbed the hill past the King's Arms, and entered the Forest.

§ 2

The first leaves of autumn were beginning to fall when Catherine returned to Bockley after a fortnight at Hastings. Day after day of glorious September weather had covered her cheeks and arms and hands with freckles: her hair, too, was fluffed and shining with continual sea-bathing: her general appearance was rather wild and undomesticated for such a place as Bockley. She returned on Saturday night, and Sunday found her waiting outside the Baptist

Church at Upton Rising. Evening service was over at eight o'clock, and she judged that Helen would be there.

Helen greeted her at the church door.

"Only you?" said Catherine.

Helen nodded. "The others went for a walk. . . . It's a fine night—let's take a tram to the Forest."

The trams of the London County Council ran along the end of the road. They boarded one; it was full, and they had to stand on the top.

"You look well," remarked Helen.

"Oh, I'm all right," replied Catherine, and the conversation languished.

What ensued after that would always in Catherine's mind be inextricably bound up with the sway and purr of trams along the high road.

"George has gone away," remarked Helen, à propos of nothing.

"Oh?"

"His firm's given him a job in Manchester. A good opening, it seems. . . . I got a letter from him yesterday. He enclosed a note for you: I suppose he didn't know your address. . . . I believe I've got it on me. . . ."

She fished in her hand-bag and extracted an envelope, from which she took a folded half-sheet of paper and handed the latter to Catherine.

It was rapidly getting dusk, but the lights in the tram were not yet lit. On every alternate tramway standard hung an arc lamp, and these were now fizzing and spluttering into pale brilliance. Catherine read the note (it was roughly written in copying pencil) in quick spasms as the car swirled along.

My Dear Cathie,

As you will perceive, I have got shifted to Manchester, where I shall no longer have the pleasure of your delightful society, which, as you will not doubt, is a great loss to me personally. However, I am likely to enjoy my stay here: there are some splendid girls working in the same office with me, though none of them has your own inimitable red hair. If there is one thing I regret it is that the before-mentioned red hair has occasionally led me to say things I did not mean and to do things I did not mean to do. I am sure that you,

with your wonderful capacity for understanding, will grasp what I am trying to sketch out. We have had some interesting discussions together during the last few months, and for these at least (not to mention the spiritual inspiration given me by the passionate flame of your hair) I am deeply grateful.

I hope you will always believe me to be what I am, viz., your sincere admirer,

GEORGE TRANT.

P.S.—My lodgings are not permanent, so there would be little point in enclosing my address.

Catherine was slow to grasp the full meaning of the note. As it dawned upon her her lips tightened, and she gripped fiercely the rail against which she was leaning. The tram lurched to a standstill, and there was the usual scramble to get down the stairs. "High Wood," the conductor called out.

"Come on," said Helen, and they descended.

In the Forest glades the night air was cool and sweet. For some distance they walked on in silence. Catherine was the first to speak. They had reached a clearing, and under the open sky the daylight still lingered.

"I daresay you'd like to read it," said Catherine. She held out the note at arm's length.

Helen gave a queer ejaculatory laugh.

"I've already done so," she said.

"What?"

"Oh, I know it's not quite the thing to read other people's letters. . . . But I wanted to know what . . . what he would say to you, and I thought perhaps you wouldn't show me."

Catherine crumpled up the note and put it in her pocket.

"Well, you know, anyway," she said gloomily.

They passed again into the cool Forest glades.

"I was right," said Helen, quietly. "I knew he'd write you something like that. He's good at that kind of letter-writing . . . sort of cheap cleverness he excels at I'd half a mind not to let you see it."

There came a long pause. They had reached the high road to Chingford before it was broken.

Catherine suddenly took the crumpled letter from her pocket, and began tearing it up into minute fragments.

"See," she cried passionately, "you can tell him this is what I did with his letter! You can tell him there's better fellows in the world than he is, and Cathie Weston isn't going to break her heart over *him!* . . . Tell him I'm not a soppy little schoolgirl."

She flung the pieces on the ground, and began stamping on them.

"You're being silly," said Helen, quietly.

"And tell him," went on Catherine, "that if he thinks he's under an obligation to me, he's made a mistake. I'm grateful to him—for letting me see what he really is."

Her words rattled like the passage of a lorry over granite setts.

"Come on," said Helen, "we'll get to Chingford, and take the train back."

"You'll tell him?"

"I don't promise. I think you'd better forget all about him . . . after all, you can't do anything. . . ."

"I don't want to! I merely want him to know that I don't mind."

"Well, that's all right, then. He'll know that if he hears nothing from you."

"He won't. He'll think he's left a broken-hearted girl to cry over him."

"I don't think he will."

". . . because I don't believe in being broken-hearted. I don't think it's possible to die of a broken heart. I'm certain I shan't, anyway. I won't let any man mess about with *my* life. It'll take a pretty big misfortune to make life not worth living to me. If he's tired of me I'm just as tired of him. Tell him that!"

"This way . . ." said Helen, guiding her into the Station Road. "We'll just be able to catch the 9.45. . . ."

§ 3

Helen left the train at Upton Rising, but Catherine went on to Bockley. The Town Hall struck the hour of

ten as she was walking up the station approach. At this time the crowds along the High Street were beginning to disperse ; the trams and buses were full of returning excursionists. Neglectful of the time and with no very definite aim in view, Catherine turned into the Ridgeway. It was directly opposite to the quickest way home, but its shady avenues and flower-scented front gardens suited her mood better than the stark frowsiness of Hanson Street. Her mind was in flux. She did not know whether what had happened was going to be an important stage in her life or not. She did not know how much of her feeling was disappointment, and how much was mere wounded dignity. She could not estimate the depth of the feeling she had had for George Trant. It seemed inconceivable that she had ever been in love with him. . . .

She started to administer to herself wholesome correctives. " It's no good," she told herself brutally, " your imagining yourself the heroine of a tragedy, suffering more poignantly than ninety-nine people out of every hundred, because it's not the truth. What you are feeling now is felt sometime or other by the majority of all people : there's nothing a bit singular or exceptional in your case. It's a mistake to pride yourself on suffering more exquisitely than other people."

Then she poured cold logic over herself.

" He's only one man among millions, and in no sense is he markedly superior to the average. A certain spurious cleverness, a talent for mockery, a deft finesse in expressing cruel things in soft words . . . absurd that he should become so much to you or to any girl . . . there's nothing admirable in him, therefore you are lucky to get rid of him."

It sounded convincing enough.

She walked on, scarce heeding whither she was going, and all the time her mood alternated between stormy resentment and cold self-reproach. There were moments too of grey hopelessness, and it was only her constantly recurring indignation that swept her out of these. Every inch of the roads she traversed was associated with him :

every gate and tree seemed to call out in mocking melancholy—"This was where . . . this was where. . . ." Not a street corner but was inextricably bound up in her mind with some remark of his and the exact phase of their relationship when he had uttered it. . . .

Under heavy trees that split the moonlight into a thousand fragments she suddenly heard the rich hum of a grand piano. She stopped. She stood in the shadow of the hedge and listened in rapture. The house was a large one, with a corner bay-window wide open, and it was from that room evidently that the music was proceeding. It was some rapid piece full of rippling streams of notes with very few chords, octaves in the base clef that thundered like the oncoming tide, swirling waves of treble triplets that were light as air, yet beneath all the laughter and freedom, a sense of dim, unuttered passion, half hopeful, half melancholy. Long afterwards she knew it was Chopin's Black Note Study in G flat. But then it had no name to her. It might have been the latest ragtime craze for all she knew: all she cared was that it expressed all the feelings in her own heart that she had thought inexpressible, things that she had often and in vain tried to wring out of the Collard and Collard at home. At that moment it is probable that she would have given everything she had in the world for that piano. It stood to her as the one way to salvation. She would have bartered her soul for it. As it was, she stood there in the spattered moonlight and cried for it. At any rate, she cried. . . . The piece finished up in a tremendous cascade of double octaves, and she waited nearly half an hour after that, hoping the playing might begin again. Then she walked back to Kitchener Road almost in a state of trance. The Bockley High Street was very white and deserted, and far into the dim distance stretched the tram-rails, blue and infinite. It was long past eleven. But Catherine was dreaming—dreaming of one thing only (though that one thing was strangely complicated by other things)—dreaming of a grand piano, dreaming of the ecstasy of playing it as she had heard it played that

night. The vision of her ambition came to her as she turned into Kitchener Road. She would become a great pianoforte player. Already discerning critics—adjudicators at musical festivals and such like—had prophesied a career for her if she would work hard. Hitherto it had not seemed worth while to work hard. Now it became suddenly and tremendously worth all the soul and energy she could give to it. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else could ever matter. Whatever stuff her soul was made of, music was part of it, and music would answer everything her soul asked.

At home her father was waiting up, vaguely remonstrative as usual.

"Worse and worse it gets, Cathie . . ." he began . . . "the first night you're home after your holiday you land in at twenty to twelve! . . . it's not good enough . . . you've had all the morning and afternoon. I can't think what makes you want to go walking the streets this time. . . ."

"I'm not having any supper," she said brusquely. "Good-night. . . ."

"But——"

"Oh, don't worry . . . I've had some," she lied. As she fled upstairs she heard him murmuring something. A great change had come over him since his wife died. He had been getting ever slower and feebler. It was becoming more and more evident that it had been only his wife's incessant nagging that had spurred him to the minimum of activity. Now he pottered aimlessly about the garden. His attendances at the Duke Street Chapel became more and more infrequent, and finally ceased altogether. People said (often facetiously) that he was pining away of grief at his wife's death. It is doubtful if this were a complete diagnosis. . . .

Up in the little back bedroom Catherine did a thing which she had not done for a long time. She prayed. Ch-artinevin was no longer a choleric old gentleman with white side-whiskers and a devouring passion for adulatory worship. He had long ago ceased to be that, and he had

not begun to be anything else. Catherine, though she never altogether recognized her position, had no very definite belief in either Him or the rest of the accepted doctrines of Christianity. She prayed, not out of religious fervour, but from a variety of complex motives, one of which was certainly a desire to straighten out her own ideas by reducing them to more or less coherent form. Among other things, she prayed for a grand piano. "Lord, give me a grand piano," was her unorthodox variant upon the more usual bedtime supplications. "Lord, *do* give me a grand piano," she pleaded. It is curious, but she did not in the least expect the Lord to take any notice. She was even doubtful whether the Lord were listening. Yet she kept on repeating the demand for a grand piano. Also she decided how she would catalogue the whole George Trant episode. It was nothing. It was to be regarded as nothing. Tears broke in upon her decision to regard it as nothing. The grand piano and all that it meant to her kept looming on the horizon. Then she felt a little ashamed of crying. "I never used to cry," she thought. "Not even after a sound thrashing." She tried to calm herself. "I'm getting soppy," she reflected. "Crying like a little kid. All because of that piano. That's what done it. . . ." It was long past midnight when she fell into troubled sleep.

CHAPTER IV

NOCTURNE

§ 1

On a certain bitterly cold night in November, Catherine stood on the doorstep of No. 24, Kitchener Road, with her overcoat and hat in her hands. Despite the chilliness of the atmosphere her cheeks were hot and flushed, and her sensations took no notice of the blustering wind that raged along the road. For several moments she stood still on the doorstep, with heaving breast and head flung back defiantly. Then, still carrying her hat and overcoat, she went out into the street, omitted to shut the gate behind her, and walked at a terrific pace in the direction of the Bockley High Street.

It was eleven p.m. Her steps rang loudly along the deserted pavements; occasionally she lurched forward as if desiring to increase her pace, and this disturbed the rhythmic beat of her steps. She passed nobody, except at the junction of Hanson Street, where a couple of belated revellers slunk past with the furtive attitude of those who know they ought to have been home long since. They were too intent upon their destination to notice her. Only where there were large front gardens did her passing excite attention, and here congregations of cats, gathered for midnight revelry, dispersed with mournful sound as her footsteps approached.

At the corner of the High Street she stopped. It seemed to occur to her for the first time that to carry one's hat and overcoat upon such a night was in some degree unusual. With careful deliberation she put them on. Then she laughed softly, and her laugh was a strange mingling

of rapture and defiance. That which she had thought impossible had come to pass. After years of undeviating placidity fate had at last done something dramatic with her.

She had been turned out of the house at No. 24, Kitchener Road.

Her father had done what he had never before been known to do: he had lost his temper, and lost it thoroughly.

He had said: "My God, Cathie, I won't stand that! . . . Out you go!" He had pushed her into the lobby, and while she was reaching for her hat and coat he had struck her on the face with the back of his hand.

"Out you go!" he repeated, and Catherine saw that his temper had not yet reached its height. "I'm done with you! . . . Are you going?" He actually picked up an umbrella and began brandishing it with his hand grasping the ferrule.

Catherine had opened the front door in vague terror of what he was going to do. The door was banged after her with a vicious kick from within. Then her cheek where he had struck her began to hurt. . . .

§ 2

The cause of the altercation had been Catherine's determination to accept a situation which he did not wish her to accept. She had answered the advertisement, interviewed her prospective employer, and received word that she had been appointed before even mentioning the matter to him. Then at teatime on a Friday afternoon she casually remarked:

"By the way, I've decided to get some work."

He looked up at her as if the word were unfamiliar to him. "Work?" he said, astounded. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I've applied for a job and been offered it."

He seemed to have difficulty in comprehending what she said.

"A job? What job?"

"They want a pianist at a cinema. Good salary. Only work in the evenings. . . ."

"But, my dear girl——"

"Well?"

"Don't cut me short like that. . . . I was about to say. . . ."

"Oh, I know what you're about to say. You're hopelessly against it, aren't you?"

"Well, if I am, you——"

"Why are you?"

"I do wish you'd give me time to speak, Catherine. You spring this on me so suddenly. . . . I had no idea you were ever thinking of such a thing, to begin with. Even now it seems incredible to me. I can't understand it."

"Can't understand what?"

"Why you want to do it . . . it's . . . it's unnecessary. Haven't you enough money?"

"Oh, it's not a question of money. I want to have some work to do, something to get interested in."

"But you have the work of the house to carry on with. Surely that's enough."

"Oh, *that's* enough. In fact, that's a great deal too much. I'm sick and tired of housework. Some girls may like it, but I don't. I'd sooner pay some girl who likes it to do it for me. Besides, I want to be independent."

He gave a start of surprise. "What's that you said?" he asked, incredulously.

"I said, independent."

There was a tense pause.

"Somebody's been putting some silly modern ideas into your head. All that bosh about independence, I mean. A girl's place is in the home, when she's got one. Until you make a home of your own your place is here."

"I suppose you think I ought to get married."

"Married? . . . Heavens, no! . . . . You're only nineteen! Why, I never even *met* your mother until I was twenty-four! Don't you worry your head about marriage. Let it alone until the right feller comes along. I expect you've been reading too many trashy novels lately, that's what it is."

An angry light leapt into her eyes.

"Well, if you think I'm going to scrub floors and wash dishes until the right feller comes along, as you call it, you're jolly well mistaken. I wouldn't do it even if I was sure the right feller *would* come along. I'm not made that way. I want a bit of liberty. I want to live."

"My dear Catherine, you have everything you need. I can't see what you're making all this fuss about. Really I can't. . . . You're a good deal better off than some girls, I can tell you. What about poor Nellie Selborne and——"

"Oh, what on *earth* have they got to do with it?"

"Well, if you won't listen to me, I suppose . . ." He waved his hand deprecatingly. "Suppose we stop arguing. Let's hold the matter over. I'm certain that with a few days' thought you'll——"

"But I can't hold the matter over."

"Why not?"

"Because the situation's been offered me. I've either got to accept it or reject it on the spot."

"Well, Catherine, I'm sorry to go against you, but it will have to be so, in this case. Understand, I mean it. I mean to have my own way in this matter. I won't have you strumming away every night in a third-rate picture house. I'm going to put my foot down firmly in this matter. You must reject the offer."

He made a gallant but not entirely successful attempt to appear dignified by resuming the perusal of his newspaper. Catherine bit her lip and went a little pale.

"That's a pity," she said quietly.

"Why is it a pity?"

"Because I've decided to accept it." Her lips were tight, and there was the suggestion of restrained emotion in her voice.

Something happened to his eyes. They opened terrifically wide and gazed at her expressionlessly for several seconds.

"What's that?" he said.

His eyes unnerved her somewhat. But she steeled herself to repeat her ultimatum.

" Because—I've—decided to—to accept."

Pause. " That's all," she added, irrelevantly, as if by way of clinching the matter.

Another pause. The clock tactfully struck in with the announcement of six o'clock. That seemed to break the spell. He rose and made for his hat.

" H'm," he ejaculated, sharply. " I see. That's what it amounts to, is it. . . . Well, you'll have time to think it over. I'm off to school now."

He took a sheaf of night-school exercises from his desk and stuffed them in his pocket. Not another word came from him. Catherine was almost hypnotized by his quick, startling movements, so unlike his usual apathy. He strode firmly down the lobby and shut the door after him more noisily than usual. She could hear his footsteps along the street, and he was walking at a pace that was for him unprecedentedly rapid. When he was quite out of hearing she sank down into the chair he had just vacated. The tension of the argument had given her a sense of physical exhaustion. Yet spiritually she was thrilled by a strange feeling of exhilaration : it seemed to her that after an interval of drudgery she was once again being drawn into the vortex of momentous happenings. She was absolutely certain of one thing : she would not give way. If he chose to make her disobedience a " test-case " of the father's right to inflict his will upon the daughter she would await whatever steps he took with calmness and determination. But she would never give way. She was nineteen, and to her nineteen seemed old age. Things he had said in the course of the argument had annoyed her inexpressibly. They were little things, mostly. Bringing in the case of Nellie Selborne, for instance, was silly and entirely irrelevant. Nellie had paralysis down one side, and existed apparently for the purpose of proving to all other girls how lucky they were. Then again, Catherine disliked intensely his massive declaration that " a girl's place is in the home." He had talked about

" waiting for the right feller to come along," and this passive method of getting through life roused all the scorn and contempt in her nature. Also he had talked about her " strumming in a third-rate picture house." It was typical of him to assume that it was third-rate before he had heard even the name of it. He had been ridiculously unfair. . . .

She went over to the writing-desk where he marked his school exercise books. Something within her said : You are angry and excited now, but you will soon cool down and then probably you will give in to him. . . . To this she replied passionately : I *won't* give in to him. . . . But, continued the part of her which always told the truth, you *will* give in to him if you wait till your temper has cooled down. . . . Better write now accepting the situation, and post it before he comes back from night-school. Then the matter will be really settled. Then you can say to him when he comes in : " It's no use arguing about it any more. I've written to accept the job. The thing's done now and can't be undone."

She wrote the letter as quickly as she could, for the feeling of supreme depression, the feeling that she was doing something regrettable and irretrievably silly, was becoming heavier upon her every second. She was just addressing the envelope after fastening it when she heard the key fumbling at the front door. For the moment a kind of panic fear seized her. He was coming back. He must have turned back before reaching the school. His footsteps down the lobby sounded brutal and unnecessarily noisy. She swung round in her chair and sat awaiting his entrance with the penholder stuck between her teeth. The half-addressed envelope lay on the desk invisible behind her back. . . . He flung down his hat and coat on the table.

The moment was so tense that Catherine spoke merely to interrupt the horrible silence of it.

" Was there no school to-night ? " she asked, with an effort to appear perfectly casual.

" I'm not going," he snapped curtly, and took down

the red-ink bottle from the corner of the mantelpiece. That meant he was going to spend the evening marking exercise books.

She was thoroughly frightened. Her mother's tempers and tirades had never frightened her, because she was used to them and knew them intimately, as a doctor knows the illness of a familiar patient. But her father was normally so quiet and placid and mild-mannered: she had never seen him in a temper, although when she was a little girl, boys who were in his class at school had told her that on rare occasions he got "ratty." But she had never known him in such a condition. In this phase he was a complete stranger to her. And she was apprehensive, as she would have been if a stranger had entered the house when she was alone.

He came to the desk to get his exercise books. She thought at first he was going to strike her. But he merely leaned over her and lifted the lid. As he did so he must have seen the half-addressed envelope lying on the top. But he did not say a word. His silence was unnerving.

Always he used the desk for marking exercise books. But this time he arranged the pile of books and the pen and ink on the dining-table.

"You can use the desk," he said curiously, "if you're wanting to." His politeness, his unusual solicitude for her comfort, was horrible! Normally, if she had been at his desk, he would have said: "Now look here, Cathie, it's too bad of you to want to use my desk when I want it. After all, it's *my* desk. You've got all the day to use it when I'm out. Can't you use the table?"

She would have understood a speech like that. But for him to say so thoughtfully, so obsequiously, "You can use the desk if you're wanting to," was charged with all the nameless horror of the unprecedented.

It was half-past six. The clock struck. He was assiduously and seemingly quite normally putting red-ink ticks and crosses on algebra sums. Yet she knew that the atmosphere was very far from being normal. She took a book from the shelf and sat down in the chair by

the fire, but it was difficult to read. She could hear the ticking of the clock and the steady scratching of his pen, and flipping of pages. He went on for hours. When he had finished one pile of books he went to his desk and fetched out another. Then again, if he had not done so the first time, he must have seen the envelope with its incomplete address. But he went on with his work at the table. Supper time came, but he made no sign of clearing away his books. And then his surliness and sulkiness, whichever it was, ceased to frighten her, but began to annoy her acutely. . . . The last post went at eleven-thirty. Come what might she would post that letter. At five minutes past eleven she went over to the desk with the intention of finishing the address. She had got as far as the "p" in "Upton" when she saw that he was regarding her intently. As soon as he saw that she had noticed his glance he put down his pen and swung back on his chair.

"Now then, Cathie," he began brusquely, "this matter's got to be settled. . . . You understand. No nonsense. What're you going to do?"

She bit the end of the penholder.

"I'm going to accept the thing," she said firmly, though she had difficulty in restraining her apprehension and excitement.

"You're not!" he cried, advancing menacingly. "Understand, I forbid it! I'm going to be firm in this business. You're not to accept that situation. D'you hear?"

He picked up the envelope she had been engaged upon. She knew that he had seen it before. But he pretended not to have done. She despised him for that little perfidy.

"What's this?" he cried, snatching it up vehemently. Then he pretended to realize. "You've been writing to accept it?"

"Yes."

For a moment she thought he was going to do her physical violence. Then he tore the envelope across and flung the two pieces into the fire.

"Oh, *that* doesn't matter," she said contemptuously, "that's merely childish. I can easily write another." (In her anger she did not remember an occasion when she had been smitten with the same kind of childishness).

It was then that he cried: "My God, Cathie, I won't stand that! . . . Out you go!"

§ 3

At the corner of the Bockley High Street her only feeling was one of nervous jubilation. The clock chimed the quarter. She remembered with a little thrill of ecstasy how on all other occasions at night when she had heard the clock chime a quarter past eleven she had been anxiously wondering what sort of a row there would be when she reached home. Now she was free. She was not returning home. She was leaving. She was free to go where she liked and do what she liked. . . .

If it were summer time, she thought, I would walk to the Forest and sleep out under the stars. . . .

But it was November. . . . She decided to travel up to the City and spend the night in one of the waiting-rooms at the big terminals. The next day she would look out for lodgings. . . . Money was a difficulty. In her pocket was a purse containing the residue of the week's housekeeping money. It amounted to five and sevenpence halfpenny. There were also a couple of penny stamps. . . .

The ideal time for this enterprise would have been a Monday evening in June or July.

Still, she would have to make the best of it. With light step she passed along the wide expanse of the High Street in the direction of Bockley Station. As she went on little groups of returning revellers passed her by. Most of them had just come in by train from the City after an evening at the theatre. Some of them stared at her curiously as she hurried by. So did the policeman at the corner of the Station Road.

Outside the booking-office she met, of all people in the world, Helen Trant. . . . Since the episode between herself and George, Catherine had not seen much of Helen.

Catherine nodded casually, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for her to be catching the 11.37 p.m. to the City.

"Where're you off to?" said Helen.

"City," replied Catherine, curtly.

"Whatever for at this time of night?"

"Oh . . . business . . . that's all. . . . Excuse me, I shall miss my train. . . ."

"No, you won't. You've eleven minutes to wait. Come here."

There was a queer undefinable something in Helen's voice that commanded and usually obtained implicit obedience. Catherine came.

"Well? . . . What do you want?"

Helen put her arm in Catherine's.

"It's not my business," she said, "but I should like you to tell me what's been happening to you."

"Happening? What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean . . . Cathie!"

"Yes?"

"Something's happened. I can see it in your eyes. Tell me."

Catherine clicked her heels nonchalantly.

"Well, if you're so keen, I don't suppose there's much harm in letting you know. I've run away from home. . . . That's all. . . ."

"Run away?"

"Yes, run away. Oh, for God's sake, don't look so surprised. I suppose it isn't respectable to run away, is it?"

"Don't be silly. . . . What were you going to the City for?"

"To get a shake-down in a railway waiting-room."

"I see. . . . Well, you needn't do that. You can come home with me for to-night."

"Really, Helen, I can't. It's awfully good of you, but——"

"You *must*."

"But your mother——"

" Mother and father are away for the week-end."

" Really, I'd much rather not."

" That doesn't matter. You've got to. You can easily sleep with me. We'll talk the whole question over to-night before going to sleep. You can't do a big thing like this all on your own."

" That's just what I can. I'm going to, anyway. . . ."

" Well, you're coming home with me to-night, anyway. . . ."

" If you insist——"

" I do."

A man came striding up the stairs three at a time from the platform. It was George Trant.

" Sorry I'm late," he said. " The luggage-office was shut, and I had to waken somebody up. . . ." Then he saw Catherine. " . . . Er . . . I say . . . I didn't see you, Miss Weston! Or shall I call you Catherine, as I used? And how are you? I haven't heard of you for ages."

He held out his hand, but Catherine made no movement.

" I'm quite well," she said quietly. " I'm sorry I can't stop here talking; I've a train to catch. Good-night! "

" Cathie! " cried Helen, but Catherine was too far down the steps to be recalled. Helen followed her on to the platform and overtook her near to the further end.

" You're coming back, Cathie. Don't be silly. . . . You must . . ."

Catherine held herself passionately erect. The signal lights winked from red to green.

" It's no good your trying to persuade me, Helen. . . . I'm not coming. I wouldn't enter the same house with that man. . . . No, no, no, no, I'm not coming."

The train came in to the platform.

" Cathie! "

" No, no! . . . I'm not coming, I tell you. . . ." She opened the door of a third-class compartment and entered.

" You'll wish you hadn't done this, Cathie."

" Never."

The train slid away into the night and Helen was left standing on the platform. She had a swift impulse to jump into the tail-end of the now quickly-moving train and go with Cathie to the next station. But the train was moving too rapidly for her to attempt this manœuvre in safety. And behind her stood George a little bewildered (he had followed her slowly down the steps).

"What's all the fuss about?" he queried suspiciously.

"Nothing," replied Helen. Then, as they walked together along the platform, "You'll have to tell the man we gave up our tickets before."

As they hurried along the Bockley High Street the clock on the Carnegie library chimed the three-quarters. . . .

At Liverpool Street, Catherine discovered that the waiting-room did not keep open throughout the night for the benefit of girls who have run away from home. There was a man at the door inspecting tickets. Catherine was struck by a brilliant notion. There is an all-night hourly service of trains from Liverpool Street to Bockley, the same train proceeding backwards and forwards. She went to the booking-office and purchased a return ticket to Bockley (sixpence). She had a good sixpennyworth, for the next five hours she spent in the corner seat of a third-class compartment. About two a.m. she fell asleep, and when she awoke the train was jerking to a standstill at Upton Rising. The clock said twenty minutes past six. Evidently the train had undergone a change while she had slept. All those dark hours it had paraded the inner suburbs, but now it had become a thing of greater consequence: it was the first early morning train to Chingford. At the tiny Forest town Catherine left it, paying excess fare on the journey from Bockley. Dawn came as she was tramping the muddy paths of Epping Forest. She had no idea where she was going. The main thing was to get the time over. About eight o'clock she returned to Chingford, purchased some notepaper and envelopes, and went into the post-office. On the desk provided for composing telegrams she wrote a letter accepting the situation of pianist at the Royal Cinema, Upton Rising.

That done, and the letter stamped and posted, she felt calmer than she had been for some time. Then came hunger. She had a glass of milk (threepence) at a dairy and two of yesterday's buns (a penny each) from a confectioner's. Out of five and sevenpence halfpenny and two penny stamps she had now left four shillings and a halfpenny and one penny stamp, plus a third-class return half from Bockley to Liverpool Street.

She persisted in being joyous. This was to be an adventure, and she was to enter into the spirit of it. She took her buns to the top of Yardley Hill in order that she might imagine herself picnicing. She lay down on the damp grass eating, and told herself she was enjoying herself immensely. She admired the loveliness of the view with all the consciousness of a well-trained tourist. She refused to be melancholy. She discovered hundreds of excuses for feeling happy which would never have occurred to her if she had been feeling happy. As she was descending the hill after her meal it commenced to rain. She tried to see beauty in the rain. The grey sky and the sodden leaves, the squelch of her heels in the mud, the bare trees swathed in slanting rain, these, she decided, were infinitely preferable to Kitchener Road. . . . Nevertheless she would have to find lodgings.

She decided to seek them in Upton Rising.

CHAPTER V

DISILLUSIONMENTS

§ 1

Gifford Road, Upton Rising, seemed to be composed of various architectural remnants which had been left over from other streets. No. 14 was a dour, gloomy-looking edifice built of a stone-work that showed up in lurid prominence the particular form of eczema from which it suffered. The front garden was large, with evidences of decayed respectability, including a broken-down five-barred gate and the remains of a lawn. The wooden erection at the side of the house may once have been a coach-shed. . . . A flight of stone steps, much chipped and scarred, led up to a massive front door, but the usual entrance was clearly the small door underneath the steps, which generally stood ajar. . . . In the basement window appeared the "apartments" card and the ubiquitously respectable aspidistra plant. Cats of all sizes and colours haunted the long, lank grass of the front garden, and at the back there was a noisy, unkempt chicken-run.

Inside the tiny basement sitting-room Catherine tried to feel at home. The dried grasses and bric-à-brac on the mantelpiece did remind her somewhat of the front room at Kitchener Road, but the old faded photographs of the landlady's relatives, most of them mercifully obscure, made her feel strange and foreign. A stuffed canary under a glass shroud surmounted the sideboard, and Catherine decided mentally that after she had been here awhile she would remove it to a less conspicuous position. A dull piety brooded over the room: there were floridly decorated texts on the walls, "I am the Bread of Life" over the

doorway, and " Trust in the Lord " by the fireplace. The small bookshelf contained bound volumes of *The Quiver* and various missionary society reports, as well as several antiquated volumes, of which *Jessica's First Prayer* was one, presented to the landlady, as the flyleaf showed, by a certain Sunday school in South London. A couple of pictures above the mantelpiece represented the Resurrection and the Ascension, and in these there was a prolific display of white-winged angels and stone slabs and halos like dinner-plates. On a November afternoon the effect of all this was distinctly chilly.

And under the cushions of the sofa there were many, many copies of Sunday newspapers, both ancient and modern.

Mrs. Carbass was a woman of cheerful respectability. She accepted Catherine as a lodger without any payment in advance. At first she was doubtful, but the production of the letter offering Catherine the situation at the Upton Rising Royal Cinema overruled her misgivings. She was apparently an occasional patron of this place of amusement.

" Sometimes I goes," she remarked. " Of a Sat'd'y night, gener'ly. . . . In the ninepennies," she added, as if excusing herself.

Catherine lived very quietly and economically during her first few weeks at Gifford Road. She had to. Her earnings did not allow her much margin after she had paid Mrs. Carbass. Out of this margin she had to buy all kinds of things she had not counted on—chiefly changes of clothing, and ranging down to small but by no means negligible articles such as wool for darning and a tooth-brush. She decided to have no communication whatever with her father, though at first she had considered whether she would not write to him to ask him to send her all the property that was her own. Finally she decided against this, thinking that she would not care to let him imagine she was in need of anything. Sometimes the fear came to her that he would find her out : he could easily discover her address by enquiring at the Cinema. At times the fear became a definite expectation, and on rare occasions the expectation developed into what was perilously near

to a hope. Often in the streets she met people who knew her, and to these she never mentioned either her father or her attitude towards him. Most people in Kitchener Road knew or guessed what had happened: it did not cause much of a sensation, for worse things were common enough in Kitchener Road. . . . Kitchener Road was quite *blasé* of domestic estrangements. Whenever Catherine was asked how she was getting on she replied, "Oh, quite nicely, thanks," and would not pursue the subject.

At the Cinema she found work easy but not particularly interesting. She was annoyed to find herself agreeing with her father that the Upton Rising Royal Cinema was "third-rate." It was a tawdry building with an exterior of white stucco (now peeling off in great scabs), and an interior into which the light of day never penetrated. A huge commissionaire with tremendously large feet, attired in the sort of uniform Rupert of Hentzau wears on the stage, paced up and down in front of the entrance, calling unmelodiously: "Nah showin' gran' star progrem two, four, six, nine an' a shillin' this way children a penny the side daw . . ." all in a single breath. For this trying performance he was paid the sum of sixteen shillings a week. Inside the building a couple of heavily powdered, heavily rouged, heavily scented girls fluttered about with electric torches. There was no orchestra, save on Saturday nights, when a violinist appeared in a shabby dress suit and played the Barcarolle from "Tales of Hoffman," and similar selections. The rest of the time Catherine was free to play what she pleased, with but a general reservation that the music should be appropriate to the pictures shown.

On Saturday mornings there was a children's matinée, and that was nothing but pandemonium let loose. Screams, hooting, cheers, whistlings, yells and cries of all kinds. . . . On Saturday evenings the audience was select, save in the front seats near the piano. In the pale glare of the film all faces were white and tense. The flutter of the cinematograph went on, hour after hour. The piano tinkled feebly through the haze of cigarette smoke. Here and there the beam of an electric torch pierced the gloom like

a searchlight. The sudden lighting of a match was like a pause of semi-consciousness in the middle of a dream. . . .

And at eleven, when bedroom lights were blinking in all the residential roads of Upton Rising, Catherine passed out into the cool night air. Her fingers were tired ; sometimes her head was aching.

To pass along the Ridgeway now did not always mean thinking of things that had happened there. . . .

§ 2

For three months she played the piano at the Upton Rising Royal Cinema ; then she applied for and was appointed to a similar position at the Victoria Theatre, Bockley. The salary was better and the hours were not so arduous. . . . And yet she was becoming strangely restless and dissatisfied. All through her life she had had a craving for incident, for excitements, for things to happen to her. The feeling that she was doing something almost epically magnificent in living on her own whilst not yet out of her teens gave her an enthusiasm which made bearable the dull monotony of life in Gifford Road. It was this enthusiasm which enabled her joyously to do domestic things such as making her bed every morning, darning stockings, cleaning boots, etc., things that normally she loathed. For the first few months of her independence everything was transfigured by the drama of her position. The thought would occur to her constantly in trams and omnibuses when she noticed someone looking at her : " How little you know of me by looking at me ! You cannot see into my mind and know how firm and inflexible I am. You don't know what a big thing I am doing."

Reaction came.

It interested Catherine to picture various meetings with her father and to invent conversations between them in which she should be unquestionably the winner. The ideal dialogue, she had decided after much reflection, would be :

HER FATHER (*stopping her in the street*). Catherine !
SHE (*haughtily*). I beg your pardon !

HER FATHER (*tearfully*). Oh, don't be so cruel, Cathie—why don't you come back?

SHE. I am not aware that I am being cruel.

HER FATHER. You are being horribly cruel (*passionately*). Oh, Cathie, Cathie, come back! I give in about your going out to work, I give in about anything you like, only do come back, do, *do* come!

SHE (*coldly*). Please don't make a scene. . . . I am perfectly comfortable where I am and have no desire to make any alteration in my arrangements.

HER FATHER. Oh, Cathie, Cathie, you're breaking my heart! I've been lonely, oh, so lonely ever since——

SHE (*kindly but firmly*). I'm sorry, but I cannot stay to carry on a conversation like this. You turned me out of your house when *you* chose: it is for me to come back when *I* choose, *if* I choose. . . . I bear you no ill-will. . . . I must be going. Please leave go of my arm. . . .

That would be magnificent. She was sure she was not in the least callous or hard-hearted, yet it pleased her to think that her father was lonely without her. One of her dreams was to be passionately loved by a great man, and to have to explain to him "kindly but firmly" that she desired only friendship. . . .

One day she did meet her father.

She walked into a third-class compartment at Bockley Station and there he was, sitting in the far corner! Worse still, the compartment was full, saving the seat immediately opposite to him. There is a tunnel soon after leaving the station and the trains are not lighted. In the sheltering darkness Catherine felt herself growing hot and uncomfortable. What was she to do? She thought of her ideal conversation, and remembered that in it he was supposed to lead off. But if he did not lead off? She wished she had devised a dialogue in which she had given herself the lead. Yet it would be absurd to sit there opposite to him without a word. She decided she would pretend not to see him. She was carrying a music-case, and as the train was nearing the end of the tunnel she fished out a piece of music and placed it in front of her face like a newspaper. When the train emerged into daylight she discovered that it was a volume of scales and arpeggios, and that she was holding it the wrong way up. The situation was absurd.

Yet she decided to keep up the semblance of being engrossed in harmonic and melodic minors. After a while she stole a glance over the top of her music. It was risky, but her curiosity was too strong for her.

She saw nothing but the back page of the *Daily Telegraph.* It was strange, because he never read in trains. It was one of his fads. He believed it injurious to the eyes. (Many and many a time he had lectured her on the subject.)

Obviously then he was trying to avoid seeing her, just as she was trying to avoid seeing him. The situation was almost farcical. . . . There seemed to be little opening for that ideal dialogue of hers. She wished he would lean forward and tap her knee and say: "Catherine!"

Then she could drop her music, look startled, and follow up with: "I beg your pardon!"

Unfortunately he appeared to have no artistic sense of what was required of him.

It was by the merest chance that at a certain moment when she looked over the top of the scales and arpeggios he also looked up from his *Daily Telegraph.* Their eyes met. Catherine blushed, but it was not visible behind her music. He just stared. If they had both been quick enough they might have looked away and let the crisis pass. Unfortunately each second as it passed made them regard each other more unflinchingly. The train ground round the curve into Bethnal Green Station. Catherine was waiting for him to say something. At last the pause was becoming so tense that she had to break it. She said the very first thing that entered her head. It was: "Hullo!"

Then ensued the following conversation.

"Good-morning, Catherine . . . going up to the City, I suppose?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"Yes. I'm going to see some friends at Ealing. Bus from Liverpool Street."

"Oh, I go by tube to Oxford Circus. I'm seeing if they've got some music I ordered."

"Don't suppose they'll have it . . . very slack, these big London firms. . . ."

Pause.

"Getting on all right?"

"Oh, fine, thanks."

"I heard you'd got a place at the Royal Cinema."

"Oh, I soon left that . . . I'm on at the Victoria Theatre now. Much better job."

"Good . . . like the work, I suppose?"

"Rather!"

Pause.

"Nasty weather we're having."

"Yes—for April."

Pause again. At Liverpool Street they were the first to leave the compartment.

"You'll excuse my rushing off," she said, "but I must be quick. The shop closes at one on a Saturday."

"Certainly," he murmured. Then he offered his hand. She took it and said "Good-bye" charmingly. A minute later and she was leaning up against the wall of the tube subway in a state bordering upon physical exhaustion. The interview had been so unlike anything she had in her wildest dreams anticipated. Its casualness, its sheer uneventfulness almost took away her breath. She had pictured him pleading, expostulating, remonstrating, blustering, perhaps making a scene. She had been prepared for agonized entreaties, tearful supplications. Instead of which he had said: "Nasty weather we're having."

And she had replied: "Yes—for April."

As for the ideal dialogue——

§ 3

There was another surprise in store for Catherine.

In the front row of the stalls at the Bockley Victoria Theatre she saw George Trant. She was only a few feet away from him in the orchestra, and it was inevitable that he should notice her.

Now if Catherine had been asked if she would ever have anything to do with George Trant again, she would have

said " No " very decisively. She had made up her mind about that long ago. If he ever spoke to her she had decided to snub him unmercifully.

But George Trant stood up and waved to her.

" I say, Cathie ! " he said.

And Catherine looked up and said, quite naturally, " Hullo, George."

It was a revelation to her. What had she said it for ? What was the matter with her ? A fit of self-disgust made her decide that at any rate she would not continue a conversation with him. But curiously enough George did not address her again that evening. She wished he would. She wanted to snub him. She wanted to let him see how firm and inflexible she was. She wanted to let herself see it also.

§ 4

At Gifford Road, in the little bedroom, Catherine's dissatisfaction reached culminating point. Life was monotonous. The humdrum passage of day after day mocked her in a way she could not exactly define. She wanted to be swept into the maelstrom of big events. Nothing had yet come her way that was big enough to satisfy her soul's craving. Things that might have developed dramatically insisted on being merely commonplace. Even the fire of her musical ambition was beginning to burn low. Things in her life which had at first seemed tremendous were even now in the short perspective of a few months beginning to lose glamour. She thought of those dark days, not a year back, when the idea of saying " hullo " to George Trant would have seemed blasphemy. She thought of those June evenings when she had paced up and down the Ridgeway in the spattered moonlight, revelling in the morbid ecstasy of calling to mind what had happened there. All along she had been an epicure in emotions. She loved to picture herself placed in circumstances of intense drama. She almost enjoyed the disappointment and passion that George Trant had roused in her, because such feelings were at the time new to her. Yet even in her deepest gloom

something within herself whispered: "This is nothing. You are not really in love with George Trant. You are just vaguely sentimental, that's all. You're just testing and collecting emotions as a philatelist collects stamps. It's a sort of scientific curiosity. Wait till the real thing comes and you'll lose the nerve for experimenting. . . ."

Yet the episode of George Trant had stirred just sufficient feeling in Catherine to make her apprehensive of similar situations in the future. . . .

Now, as she undressed in the attic-bedroom in Gifford Road, life seemed colourless. The idea of refusing to speak to George Trant because of what had happened less than a year ago struck her as childish. She was glad she had spoken to him. It would have been silly to dignify their absurd encounter by attempting magnificence. Catherine decided that she had acted very sensibly. Yet she was dissatisfied. She had built up ideals—the ideals of the melodrama—and now they were crumbling at the first touch of cold sense. She had imagined herself being pitifully knocked about by fate and destiny and other things she believed in, and now she was beginning to realize with some disappointment that she had scarcely been knocked about at all. It was a very vague dissatisfaction, but a very intense one for all that.

"Oh, Lord, I want something, and I'm hanged if I know what it is. . . . Only I'm tired of living in a groove. I want to try the big risks. I'm not a stick-in-the-mud. . . ."

She herself could not have said whether this ran through her mind in the guise of a prayer or an exclamation. But perhaps it did not especially matter. "I guess when you want a thing," she had once enunciated, "you pray for it without intending to. In fact you can't want anything without praying for it every minute of the time you feel you're wanting it. . . . As for putting it into words and kneeling down at bedtime, I should say that makes no difference. . . ."

But she did not know what she wanted, except that it was to be exciting and full of interest. . . .

She fell asleep gazing vacantly at a framed lithograph

on the opposite wall which a shaft of moonlight capriciously illumined. It was a picture of Tennyson reading his *In Memoriam* to Queen Victoria, the poet, long-haired and impassioned, in an appropriately humble position before his sovereign. . . .

§ 5

The following morning a typewritten letter waited her arrival in the basement sitting-room. It bore on the flap the seal of a business firm in London, and Catherine opened it without in the least guessing its contents.

It began :

My Dear Cathie,

You will excuse my writing to you, but this is really nothing but a business letter. I found your address by enquiry at the theatre box-office : the method is somewhat irregular, but I hope you will forgive me.

What I want to say is this——

Catherine glanced down the typewritten script and saw the signature at the bottom. It was George Trant. Her face a little flushed, she read on :

The Upton Rising Conservative Club, of which I am a member, is giving a concert on May 2nd, in aid of the local hospitals. A friend of mine (and a fellow-member) was so impressed by your playing this evening that he suggested I should ask you to play a pianoforte solo at our projected concert. I cordially agree with his idea, and hope you will be able to accept. I enclose a draft of the musical programme so that you may realize that we are having some really "star" artists down. Bernard Hollins, for instance, has sung at the Queen's Hall. Please write back immediately in acceptance and let me know the name of the piece you propose to play, so that the programmes can go to press immediately. Excuse haste, as I must catch the 11.30 post.

Yours sincerely,
George Trant.

Catherine re-read the letter twice before she commenced to criticize it keenly. Her keen criticism resulted in the following deductions. To begin with :

This was some subtle cunning of his to entrap her. He

was clever enough to devise it. . . . What had she played last evening at the Bockley Victoria Theatre that could have " impressed " anybody so much ? The show had been a third-rate revue, the music of which was both mediocre and childishly simple. The piano was bad. She had played, if anything, not so well as usual. The piano was, for the most part, drowned in the orchestra. Moreover, there were scores of pianoforte players in the district who would have been eager to appear on such a distinguished programme as the one he had sent. It was absurd to pick her out. She had no musical degree, had never played at a big concert in her life. The other artists might even object to her inclusion if they knew who she was. In any case, no astute concert-organizer would risk putting her in. She was well-known, and scores of people would say, as soon as they saw her on the platform : " Why, that's the red-haired girl who plays the piano at the theatre."

Catherine came to the definite conclusion that the letter was thoroughly " fishy."

Yet she wrote back saying :

DEAR GEORGE,

Thanks for letter and invitation, which I am pleased to accept. My piece will be Liszt's Concert Study in A flat, unless you think it too classical, in which case I can play a Polischinelle by Rachmaninov.

Yours sincerely,
CATHERINE WESTON.

Catherine thought : If I can make use of George Trant to further my ambitions, why shouldn't I ? If this leads to anything in the way of bettering my earnings or getting engagements to play at concerts, it will be no more than what George Trant owes me. And if this is merely a trap laid for me, we'll see who's the more astute this time. In any case it should lead to some interesting situations, and it will at least vary the monotony of life. . . .

It suddenly struck her that perhaps her father would come and hear her play. The possibility opened up wild speculations. Her dramatic interest pictured him rising

from his seat in the middle of the Concert Study in A flat, and crying with arm uplifted—" God !—My daughter ! "

Or perhaps he would sob loudly and bury his head in his hands.

Yet, remembering their meeting in the railway carriage, she knew he would do nothing of the sort. . . .

. . . The audience would sit spell-bound as the Concert Study rang out its concluding chords. As the last whispered echo died on the air the whole building would ring with shouts of tumultuous applause. Those nearest the front would swarm on to the platform, seizing her hand in congratulation. A buzz of conversation would go round, startled, awe-stricken conversation : " Who is that red-haired girl ?—Who is she ?—Plays at the theatre ?—Oh, surely not. Impossible ! "

They would demand an encore. She would play Chopin's Study, " Poland is Lost."

And the *Bockley and District Advertiser* would foam at the headline with : " Musical Discovery at Upton Rising. Masterful playing by local pianiste. . . ."

No, no, all that was absurd. . . .

The audience would listen in bored silence punctuated only by the " scrooping " of chairs. She would probably tie her hands up in some of the arpeggios. There would be desultory, unenthusiastic clapping of hands at the finish. She would be asked for no encore. Somebody might say : " I fancy I've seen that girl at the theatre. She leads the orchestra." And the *Bockley and District Advertiser* would say with frigid politeness : " Miss Catherine Weston gave a tasteful rendering of Liszt's Concert Study in A flat. . . ." Or, if they had used the word " tasteful " previously, they would say " excellent " or " spirited " or " vivid."

" I suppose I'm getting cynical," she thought, as she mercilessly tore to pieces her ideal imaginations.

Yet she was very joyous that morning.

Life was going to begin for her. If events didn't carry her with them she was just going to stand in their way and make them. If not followed, she would pursue. Life, life,

her soul cried, and life was mightily interesting. There came a silver April shower, and in her ecstasy she took off her hat and braved both the slanting rain and the conventional respectability of Upton Rising. Then came the sun, warm and drying, and her hair shone like a halo of pure flame. . . . She made herself rather foolishly conspicuous. . . .

CHAPTER VI

CRESCENDO

§ 1

Long hours she practised on the Chappell grand in the room over Burlington's Music Emporium. The Concert Study in A flat began to take shape and cohesion. April swept out of its teens into its twenties, and posters appeared on the hoardings outside the Upton Rising Public Hall announcing a "Grand Evening Concert." Her name was in small blue type immediately above the ticket prices. The rest of the programme was not quite the same as the rough draft that George had sent her. It was curious, but the best-known people had been cut out. . . . Bernard Hollins, for instance, who had sung at the Queen's Hall. Those who remained to fill the caste were all people of merely local repute, and Catherine ceased to have misgivings that her performance would be mediocre compared with theirs.

One unfortunate coincidence seemed likely to disturb the success of the evening. In the very afternoon of the same day Razounov, the famous Russian pianist, was playing at the Hippodrome. Razounov did not often come to Bockley, and when he did he drew a large audience. It seemed probable that many who went to hear him in the afternoon would not care for a Grand Evening Concert on top of it. . . .

Already the bills outside the Hippodrome were advertising Razounov in letters two feet high.

§ 2

The "Grand Evening Concert" was a tame, spiritless affair. Catherine's pianoforte solo was introduced at the

commencement to tide over that difficult period during which the local élite (feeling it somewhat beneath their status to appear punctually at the advertised time) were shuffling and fussing into the reserved front seats. Her appearance on the platform was greeted with a few desultory claps. The piano (grand only architecturally) was placed wrongly ; the sound-board was not raised, and it appeared to be nobody's business to raise it for her. She played amidst a jangle of discordant noises : the rustle of paper bags and silk dresses, the clatter of an overturned chair, the sibilant murmur of several score incandescent gas lamps. All through there was the buzz of conversation, and if she looked up from the keyboard she could see the gangways full of late-comers streaming to their seats, standing up to take off their cloaks, making frantic signals to others for whom they had kept seats vacant, passing round bags of sweets, bending down to put their hats under the seat, diving acrobatically into obscure pockets to find coppers for the programme girls, doing anything, in fact, except listen to her playing. Somehow this careless, good-humoured indifference gave her vast confidence. She felt not the least trace of nervousness, and she played perhaps better than she had ever done before. She had even time to think of subsidiary matters. A naked incandescent light lit up the keyboard from the side nearest the rear of the platform, and she deliberately tossed her head at such an angle that the red cloud of her hair should lie in the direct line of vision between a large part of the audience and the incandescent light. She knew the effect of that. At intervals, too, she bent her head low to the keyboard for intricate treble eccentricities. She crossed her hands whenever possible, and flung them about with wild abandon. It would be absurd to say she forgot her audience ; on the contrary, she was remembering her audience the whole time that she was playing. And during the six or seven minutes that Liszt's Concert Study in A flat lasted, her mind was registering vague regrets. She regretted that nobody had thought to raise the sound-board for her. She regretted the omission of all those little stylish affectations which in the

first thrill of appearing on the platform she had forgotten all about; She had not polished her hands with her handkerchief before starting. She had not adjusted the music-stool. She had not pushed back the music-rest as far as it would go. She had not played the chord and arpeggio inversions of A flat major and paused dramatically before beginning the composition of Liszt. All these things she had forgotten. People would think she was an inexperienced player. Anyhow, she made up as well as she could for her initial deficiencies during the progress of the piece. She " swanked," according to the popular expression. She was very conscious of the effect her hair was or ought to be producing. . . .

As a matter of fact, nobody was either looking at her or listening to her with any particular interest or eagerness.

She was awakened from her egoistic dreams by the half-hearted applause of those people who by divine instinct know when a piece is coming to an end several bars ahead, and start their applause at the last bar but one. . . . She bowed graciously in front of the piano, and tripped lightly behind the scenes. The applause did not justify an encore. . . . She had made up her mind as she played the concluding chords of the Concert Study : If I am given an encore, I will do all those things I omitted to do before : I will polish my hands, adjust the stool, push back the music-rest, have the sound-board lifted, run up with arpeggios on the tonic. . . .

But she was not given an encore.

In the artists' room behind the scenes nobody took much notice of her. Fred Hitchcock, a local tenor with baritone leanings, was giving final frenzied directions to his accompanist, a large-featured female with an excessively low and powdered neck.

" Go slow over that twiddly bit," he whispered, catching hold of her to lead her on to the platform. " And don't forget to give me the leading note in the adagio." His hoarse voice merged into the buzz of sound that came down the corridor leading to the platform.

She overheard a conversation.

" What was that thing that girl played ? "

"What girl?"

"The girl with the red hair."

"Oh, I don't know—some Liszt thing, I think."

"Classical?"

"S'pose so . . . of course, nobody listens to pianoforte solos nowadays. . . ."

"They're too common, that's what it is. Everybody strums on the piano, more or less."

"I suppose you went to hear Razounov?"

"No, I couldn't get a seat. The Hippodrome was full of people who went to see him do something eccentric."

"Did he?"

"No, as it happened. A friend told me he just came on the platform, played like an angel for two hours, and went off again. Of course everybody was greatly disappointed."

"Naturally. . . ."

"Bockley isn't a musical suburb. It doesn't even think it is. Whereas Upton Rising thinks it is and isn't. . . . I wish that pianoforte player of ours wouldn't show so much of her red hair and try to look like a female Beethoven. . . ."

"Oh, shut up—she's probably somewhere about, she'll hear you. . . ."

Catherine put on her hat and cloak and went out by the side door. She was not angry, but she was suffering from one of those periodical fits of disillusionment which were the aftermath of her dreaming. She walked out into the Ridgeway, where the gas lamps glowed amongst the sprouting trees. Far away she could hear the clang of trams along the High Road. She passed the corner house where, it seemed now an age ago, she had discovered her soul in the murmur of a grand piano. Swiftly she walked along the tarred asphalt, thinking to reach Gifford Road and have supper. She felt disappointed. The evening had been lacking in that species of adventure it had seemed to promise. She had not seen George Trant. That, she told herself, had nothing to do with it.

Down the Ridgeway a newsboy came running bearing a placard-sheet in front of him.

" Suicide of a Bockley Schoolmaster," it said. An awful excitement seized her. Eagerly she bought a paper and searched the front page.

It took some moments to discover the announcement. It was only a small paragraph on an inside page: the placard had evidently been printed to stimulate local circulation.

" Mr. Weston," she read, " of 24, Kitchener Road, Bockley, an elementary school teacher at the Downsland Road Council School . . . throat cut. . . ."

She leaned up against the iron railing round a tree. Then, discovering that she was attracting the attention of passers-by, she walked on more swiftly than before. In her excitement she took the opposite direction, towards the Bockley High Street. . . .

§ 2

Half-way down the Ridgeway she met George Trant. They were both walking excessively fast and in opposite directions : they almost cannoned into each other.

" Just looking for you," he said, stopping her. He wore evening dress beneath an overcoat. It was peculiar that her eyes should glue themselves upon an ivory solitaire that he wore. She was half dazed.

" Looking for me ? " she echoed, vaguely.

" Yes. Thought you'd gone back to your digs. I was coming to fetch you. What I want to say is——" (That was one of his mannerisms of speech. In his letters he had constantly written, " What I want to say is——") " we're having a little supper at the Forest Hotel after the concert's over. Just ourselves—the performers, I mean. Of course you'll join us. . . . I didn't think you'd be running off so early, or I should have mentioned it before. . . ."

She was still staring monotonously at that ivory solitaire of his.

" Well—er—you see . . . er. . . ."

" Of course if you're engaged for somewhere else——"

" No, I'm not engaged for anywhere else." She paused, as if weighing things in the balance. Then a change came

over her. It was as if she were suddenly electrified. Her eyes lifted and were found shining with peculiar brilliance. Her body, too, which had been tiredly swaying, jerked all at once into challenging rigidity. "All right," she said, and even in her voice there was a new note, "I'll come."

"Good." He looked a little queerly at this transformation of her. "Then we'll go now."

"But it's not half-past nine yet. The concert won't be over till after ten."

"That doesn't matter. I've got to go to the hotel to fix up arrangements. You'd better come with me."

"Right." The promptitude of her reply had something in it of riotous abandon.

"We'll go by bus to High Wood and walk the rest. It's sooner. . . ."

Again she acquiesced, this time by a nod that seemed to indicate an eagerness too great to be put into words.

At the corner of the Bockley High Street they took a bus. They occupied the front seat on the top. The night was moonless, but stars were shining over the whole sky. In front and behind stretched the high road with arc lights gleaming like a chain of pearls. She thought of that other evening when she had ridden with Helen along this very road on the top of a crowded tram-car. She remembered how in the passing glare of the arc-lamps she had read the note which George Trant had enclosed for her. She remembered it all as clearly as if it had happened yesterday, though in point of time it seemed to belong to another age. She remembered the purr of the quickly-moving car, the hiss of the trolley-wheel along the overhead wires, the buzz of talk all round her, and the sharp, sickly sensation of reading a few words in spasms and fitting them into their context when the pale light merged into the darkness.

But even while she thought of these things she became greatly joyous. She took off her hat and stuffed it into her pocket (it was of the kind that yields to such treatment). Her hair blew in soft spray about her head and shoulders, and her eyes were wet with the tears that the cool wind brought. She remembered that once he had said 'My

God! . . . your hair! . . ." He might not say it again, but perhaps he would think it.

"I liked your playing," he said.

"You did?"

"Rather. . . . I'm not much of a judge, but I can always tell a real musician from a false one. The real musician throws his whole soul into his music. . . ."

"Did I?"

"Yes. I know you did. You played almost unconsciously. I believe you forgot all about your audience. You were just playing for the sheer love of playing. . . ."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Well, you're wrong, anyway." She laughed defiantly. "I didn't forget about my audience a bit: I kept on remembering them the whole time. I kept on thinking: 'Did they notice that little bit? . . . I polished off that arpeggio rather nicely; I wonder if anybody noticed it. . . .' And as for throwing my whole soul into my music, I'm not so sure—whether—even—whether——"

"Yes?"

She tossed back her head so that her hair danced like flame. The bus jerked to a standstill.

"Whether I've got a soul," she said very quickly. "Come on, we're at High Wood."

They clambered down the steps.

"I'm sure you have," he said, as he helped her off the conductor's platform.

"Oh, *you* don't know anything about me," she snapped, as they entered the footpath through the Forest.

"I believe I know a very great deal about you," he said quietly.

"Of course you believe so. Well, I don't mind you telling me."

He stroked his chin reflectively.

"Well, to begin with," he said, "you're passionate."

She burst into sudden, uncontrollable, crackling laughter. In the empty spaces of the Forest it sounded like musketry.

"I knew you'd say that. . . . I knew you would. And

for the life of me I don't know whether you're right or wrong. Every woman likes to think she's passionate. And nobody knows whether she's any more passionate than anybody else. . . . Pass on to the next point. You may be right or you may be wrong about the last."

"You're impulsive—but good-natured."

"Oh, rather. A kind heart beneath a rough exterior, eh?

"I'm quite serious."

"Are you? I'm not."

She frisked along in front of him, revelling in the rustle of last autumn's leaves.

"Do you know what I should do if I were serious?" she asked suddenly, when he had caught up to her.

"No."

She walked a little way in silence, kicking up the dried leaves with her toes.

"What would you do?" he said.

Her voice became fierce. "I should——" she began, and stopped. She walked a few steps as if pondering, then she laughed airily and tossed her head. "I really don't know what I should do. Only I'm certain of one thing: I shouldn't be with you here."

She could almost feel the extent to which her conversation was mystifying him.

Then she became quiet and submissive, nestling like a stray kitten at his side. She took his arm.

"I'm going to lean on you," she said; "I nearly fell over a tree root just there."

He looked gratified. For three or four minutes they walked on in silence. He had plenty he wished to say, but as a matter of fact he thought this particular silence, coming when it did, rather impressive, and he was unwilling to curtail it by a remark unworthy of its profundity. He was engaged in thinking of that remark, a remark that should not so much break the silence as guide it into still more profound depths. He had almost decided on what he should say when quickly and without any warning she snatched her arm from his and scampered a few paces ahead.

" Oh, George," she cried, with an extraordinary mingling of passion and irritation, " *do* say something ! For God's sake keep up the conversation ! We've been a quarter of an hour without a word. Say something, anything you like—only I can't stand this mooning about under the trees saying nothing ! "

" You're in a very extraordinary mood to-night," he said deliberately. He was genuinely disappointed.

" I am, or I shouldn't have come with you," she replied bluntly.

" Do you dislike me, then ? " he asked, with a kind of injured dignity.

" Oh no—oh, don't let's talk seriously. I tell you I don't feel serious to-night."

" Well, you won't need to be. We're going to have a very jolly evening."

" I hope so. That's why I came. I feel like having a jolly evening."

The Forest Hotel occupied a fine position on the crest of a thickly-wooded hill overlooking one of the prettiest spots in Epping Forest. A large balcony opened on to the dining-room, which was on the first floor, and Chinese lanterns swung loosely from the ornamental pilasters. As Catherine caught sight of the table, a vista of white and silver and gleaming glass, she clapped her hands ecstatically. She was as a little child in her enthusiasm.

" Oh, fine—fine ! " she cried, clutching George once more by the arm.

The table was on the balcony, and inside the dining-room the floor had been cleared, presumably for dancing. A sleek grand piano sprawled across one corner. Catherine rushed up to it and immediately plunged into some rapid, noisy piece. It was a splendid instrument, and the dim light (only the swaying lanterns on the balcony were lit) threw her into rapture. George came to her side, watching in admiration. Watching rather than listening, because, as he had himself admitted, he was no judge of music. And also because the red glow from the swinging lanterns kindled her hair like a puff of wind on smouldering charcoal.

" There ! " she cried, triumphant, as she executed something difficult with her left hand. She swung into a dirge-like melody, tired of it seemingly, and broke into energetic ragtime. George felt it was in some way inappropriate to play ragtime at such a moment.

" Let's come out on to the balcony," he suggested, " we've only got a quarter of an hour or so before the others come."

" Well, we've nothing particular to do, have we ? "

" It's cooler. . . . Come on. . . ."

They walked through the French windows and sat on the parapet overlooking the gravel courtyard and the blurred panorama of the Forest.

" It ought to be moonlight," he exclaimed rapturously.

" No, it oughtn't," she contradicted. " I'm glad it isn't. Starlight is much better."

It was not an encouraging beginning for him.

" Do you mind if I talk to you seriously ? " he asked.

She laughed a little unsympathetically.

" Not at all, only I don't suppose I shall talk to you seriously."

" Then it's not much good, is it ? " he remarked, crest-fallen.

" No. Much better to talk nonsense. Let's talk nonsense. Does one eat oysters with a spoon or a fork ? "

" I can't——"

" But I want to know. I noticed we begin with oysters, and I'm not sure what tools to use. Surely you don't want me to make a fool of myself. Come, tell me, how does one masticate oysters ? "

" A fork is customary, I believe."

" Thank you. That is what I wanted to know."

There was a pause, during which the distant sound of voices reached them from the dim Forest background.

" They're just coming," she said. " They must have come by bus, like we did."

He ground his heel into the carpet-matting.

" What I want to say——" he started suddenly. " It's like this. I believe there was a—a sort of—er—misunder-

standing between us at one time. Now I'm not prepared to say that I was altogether right. In fact——"

"I don't remember any misunderstanding. I think I at any rate understood you perfectly. I really don't know what you're talking about."

"Well, to put it bluntly, what happened was——"

"Excuse me. I *must* let them hear the piano as they come out of the Forest. Sorry to cut short our argument, but I don't feel metaphysical. . . . What shall I play? Something appropriate. . . . Suggest something!"

He sat rather gracelessly on the parapet watching her as she skipped over to the piano. The expression on his face was one of bafflement.

"I really don't——" he called ineffectually.

For answer she began the pianoforte accompaniment of Landon Ronald's "Down in the Forest."

A moment later over the fringe of Forest still untraversed came the voice of the soprano singer, clear and tremulous, but not particularly musical. "Down in the Forest something stirred," she sang, and Catherine laughed as she caught the sound. . . .

§ 3

About twenty minutes to midnight the tenor singer (with baritone leanings) whispered to George Trant: "I say, ol' chap. You'd better l'kafter tha' l'l gaerl of yours."

"What d'you mean?"

"Wha' I say. She's had too much."

"But really, I don't think——"

"Two glasses sherry, one hock, three champagne, two port . . . I've took notice."

"She's a bit noisy, I'll admit. . . . But she was quite lively enough as we came along. It's her mood, I think, mostly."

The party had left the table and split up into groups of twos and threes. Some lingered sentimentally on the balcony; the violinist, who was just a shade fuddled, lay sprawled across a couch with his eyes closed. Catherine was at the piano, making the most extraordinary din

imaginable. Surrounding her were a group of young men in evening dress, singers and comedians and monologuists and what not. George Trant and the tenor singer stood at the French windows, smoking cigars and listening to the sounds that proceeded from the piano.

" We shall have the manager up," said George, nervously. " He'll say we're damaging the instrument. . . . I wish she'd quieten down a bit. The whole place must be being kept awake. . . ."

Catherine's voice, shrill and challenging, pierced the din.

" Impressions of Bockley High Street—nine p.m. Saturday night," she yelled, and pandemonium raged over the keyboard. It was really quite a creditable piece of musical post-impressionism. But the noise was terrific. Glissandos in the treble, octave chromatics in the bass, terrible futurist chords and bewildering rhythms, all combined to make the performance somewhat painful. Her select audience applauded enthusiastically.

George Trant moved rather nervously towards the piano.

" I shouldn't make quite so much noise," he began, but nobody heard him. Catherine was crying out " Marbl'arch, Benk, L'pol Street," in the approved jargon of the omnibus conductor, and was simultaneously making motor-bus noises on the piano. Everybody was laughing, because the mimicry of her voice was really excellent. George felt himself unable to raise his voice above the din. He paused a moment immediately behind her back and then touched her lightly on the shoulder. She did not heed. He touched her again somewhat more violently than before. She stopped abruptly both her instrumental and vocal effects, and swung round suddenly on the revolving music-stool so as to face him. Her eyes were preternaturally bright.

" Excuse me," he began, and something in her eyes as she looked up at him made him doubly nervous, " but perhaps it would be better if you didn't make quite such a noise. . . . You see, the other people . . ." he added vaguely.

There was absolute silence now. The last echo of the

piano had died away, and the select audience waited rather breathlessly for what might happen.

Catherine rose. There was that greenish-brown glint in her eyes that made fierce harmony with her hair. For a moment she looked at him unflinchingly. There was certainly defiance, perhaps contempt in her eyes.

"Who are *you*?" she said, with quiet insolence.

Somebody tittered.

George Trant looked and felt uncomfortable. For answer he turned slowly on his heel and walked away. It seemed on the whole the most dignified thing to do. Catherine flushed fiercely. Like a tigress she bounded to his side and made him stop.

"For God's sake, don't sulk!" she cried wildly. "Wake up and say something! Don't stand there like a stone sphinx! Wake up!"

With a quick leap she sprang upwards and ran her two hands backwards and forwards through his hair. His hair was long and lank and well plastered. After she had finished with it it stood bolt upright on his head like a donkey fringe. Everyone roared with laughter.

During the progress of this operation the interior door had been opened and a man had entered. In the noise and excitement of the mêlée he was not noticed. He was tall, severe-looking and in evening dress. When the excitement subsided they found him standing a little awkwardly on the edge of the scuffle.

Catherine thought he was at least an under-waiter, come to complain of the noise they were making.

He bowed very slightly, and immediately everybody felt sure he was a waiter. Only a professional could have bowed so chillingly.

Catherine, with flushed face and dishevelled hair, leaned against a chair, panting from her exertion.

"I do not wish to interrupt," began the stranger, and there *might* have been sarcasm in his voice, "but I have been commissioned to deliver a message to Miss Weston. Which is Miss Weston?"

"I am Miss Weston," gasped Catherine. Then, to

everyone's amazement, she proceeded furiously: "I know it—I know it. You needn't tell me! I saw it in the papers . . . I suppose they'll say it's all my fault. . . . Do they want me? . . . if so, I'll come. I'll come with you now if you like. . . ."

The stranger raised his eyebrows slightly.

"I have no desire for you to come anywhere with me. . . . I don't know what you are talking about, either. My message is contained in this note, and there is no immediate necessity to reply to it."

Somebody said, rather in the spirit of a heckler at a political meeting: "Who sent it?" The stranger turned and said: "I should think Miss Weston and not I should be asked that." The questioner subsided ignominiously.

Catherine took the envelope that the stranger offered her. She put it unread into her pocket. The stranger bowed and walked out. Silence. . . . Then a chatter of conversation.

"Admirer of yours," said the violinist, thickly, from his couch. Everybody thought he had been asleep.

"Didn't exactly get you at a good moment," remarked the tenor singer, flicking away his cigar-ash.

"Looked like an undertaker," said the soprano.

"Or the 'salary-doubled-in-a-fortnight' man in the efficiency advertisements," put in the monologuist.

Catherine started to arrange her hair.

"I'm going," she said, and walked towards the balcony (there was no exit that way). Near the French windows she staggered and fell, fortunately upon the cushions of a couch. They all crowded round her. She did not attempt to rise.

"She's drunk," muttered the violinist.

"Possibly . . ." said George Trant, bending down to her. "Fetch some water. I think she's fainted. . . ."

CHAPTER VII

TRAGEDY

§ 1

On the first of May the weather was very sultry. Downsland Road, running past the front of the Council School, was both blazingly hot and distressingly conscious that it was Friday afternoon. The road was bursting out in little gouts of soft tar : costermongers were arranging their wares for the evening's marketing, spitting contemplatively on the apples and polishing them afterwards on their coat-sleeves. Children with clanking iron hoops converged from all directions upon the four entrance gates of the Downsland Road Council School, respectively those of the boys', girls', infants' and junior mixed departments. There they either carried or dragged them surreptitiously along, for the trundling of hoops was forbidden in the schoolyard.

At five minutes to two, threading his way past the groups of boys and girls that littered the pavements and roadways, came the short, stumpy form of Mr. Weston. He was shabbily dressed as usual, yet it might have been said that he carried his umbrella somewhat more jauntily than was his wont. In fact, people had lately been saying that he was beginning to get over the loss of his wife. . . . At any rate he passed the costermongers and their stalls in a slouch that was not quite so much a slouch as usual, smiled pleasantly as he caught sight of the announcement of a Conservative Club soirée, and had just reached the edifice known as the Duke Street Methodist Chapel when his attention was arrested by an awful spectacle.

The Duke Street Methodist Chapel, it may here be remarked, was a structure of appalling ugliness situate in the

very midst of some of the worst slums in Bockley. Its architecture was that of a continental railway station, and its offertories between a pound and thirty shillings a Sunday. Inside the hideous building, with her back to the blue-distempered wall of the choir, the late Mrs. Weston had for many years yelled the hymns at the top of her voice. . . . And along the brown matting of the left-hand aisle Mr. Weston, suave and supple, collection-plate in hand, had in his time paced many miles. . . . Once, when the church steward was ill, his voice had been heard aloft in the reading of the notices. And at the left-hand door, while the organist played the " War March of the Priests," he had stood with outstretched hand, saying :

" Good evening, Mrs. Lawson. . . . Good evening, Ethel. . . . 'Night, Miss Picksley . . . see you at the Band of Hope on Tuesday, I suppose ? . . ."

He did not do that sort of thing now. In the chapel he was little seen, and the Temperance Society knew him not. Only the Guild and Mutual Improvement Society still counted him as a member, and that was solely because they had not worried him into resigning. . . . At the Guild and Mutual Improvement Society Mr. Weston's carefully read papers, once a session, on " Milton," " John Wycliff, Scholar and Saint," " The Lake Poets," etc., had been a well-known, but unfortunately not always well-attended feature.

For over a year the fixture-card had lacked the name of Mr. Weston.

And then, a fortnight ago—to be precise, on April 14th—Mr. Weston had been stopped in the street by Miss Picksley, the secretary of the Guild and Mutual Improvement Society. She had said :

" Oh, Mr. Weston, *do* give us one of your literary evenings, will you ? "

Perhaps it was the subtle compliment contained in the phrase " literary evenings " that caused Mr. Weston not to say " I am sorry, but, etc., etc. . . ." as quickly as he had intended.

Miss Picksley exploited the delay brilliantly.

" Good ! " she cried, whipping out a pencil and notebook, " I'll get your name down for May 1st. . . . What'll be your subject ? "

" But, er . . . I don't . . . er——"

" Something about literature, eh ? . . . Oh, do, please ! " purred Miss Picksley, making eyes at him. (She was really anxious for him to accept, because she had canvassed in vain seven other speakers.) " Tell me your subject, then it can go down on the fixture-cards."

Mr. Weston, to his astonishment, lost his head and struck blindly at the first literary name that came into his disordered mind.

" Shakespeare," he gasped.

Miss Picksley departed, calling blessing upon his head.

§ 2

Now, as Mr. Weston passed the scene of so many of his former labours, he felt not altogether sorry that to-night, in the schoolroom adjoining the chapel, he would address a small but certainly select gathering on the subject of " Shakespeare." . . . He would have liked to have expanded the title of his paper into " Shakespeare, Man or Superman ? " after the fashion of a certain Methodist preacher who occasionally visited Bockley. However. . . .

Mr. Weston, it may be remarked, was feeling in quite a tolerably good humour. He was beaming genially at the world in general when a horrible sight met his eyes. Then his brow darkened into a frown. The smile left his face ; his lips tightened ominously. He stopped, swung down his umbrella from its jaunty attitude, and stared. His eyes flamed. The slope of his nose became full of menace.

For there, before his eyes, chalked up in scrawly writing on the foundation-stone of the Duke Street Methodist Chapel, was an inscription that excited his horrified attention. " This stone was laid . . . to the glory of God . . . the Rev. Samuel Smalljohn . . ." he read, and " Let your light so shine. . . ." And underneath that, in a space that made it most conspicuous, the brutal legend : " Daddy Weston is a Soppy Fool. . . ."

Entering the Downsland Road Council School in a white heat of indignation, Mr. Weston was just able to hear the sound of suppressed laughter and scurrying feet as he entered the classroom. The conviction forced itself upon him that somebody had been watching at the keyhole. . . .

§ 3

Mr. Weston was not normally a hot-tempered man. He was by nature placid, servile, lymphatic. It was solely as a measure of self-protection that he had trained himself to lose his temper on appropriate occasions. It was part of his disciplinary outfit.

He stood glowering fiercely behind his desk.

" I want all boys who were concerned in the chalking up of those offensive remarks outside the school to stand up."

Pause. No result.

" I may say that I have already a very fair idea of who they are, and I shall be most severe with those who do not acknowledge themselves."

(A lie, but Mr. Weston's disciplinary system condoned it.)

" I may also say that for every half-minute I am kept waiting I shall keep the class in half an hour after school hours. I have already decided to keep the class in till five for keeping me waiting so long."

Here Mr. Weston pulled out his watch and placed it prominently on the desk before him. (This was mere theatricalism, as the watch did not go.)

Pause. Then a warning shuffle and seven small boys raised themselves.

Mr. Weston dived into his desk and produced seven coloured dusters for cleaning blackboards.

" Come here," he said to the seven.

The seven came.

" You will each take one of these dusters and go out into the street and obliterate every one of the marks you have made. Then you will return."

It was Mr. Weston's own invention, this disciplinary method.

§ 4

Slowly, ever so slowly, the afternoon crept by, and Mr. Weston was just beginning to congratulate himself upon having proved equal to the occasion, when an awkward but all-important fact occurred to him. If you keep your class in you have to stay in with it. Mr. Weston, of all people, ought to have learnt this lesson, yet somehow amidst the heat and sultriness of the afternoon it had escaped him. For he was tired, dead tired. And also hot. The sweat was rolling down his forehead. Oh, how he wished he had said half-past four, and not five! Confound it, why *had* he said five? Half-past four would really have done just as well. Only, having said five, he was bound (by that disciplinary code of his) to keep his word.

He took a sheaf of notes from his inside pockets and perused them diffidently. "William Shakespeare." It was to last about half an hour, and as yet Mr. Weston had thought about William Shakespeare only sufficiently for it to last twenty or twenty-five minutes. It would have to be padded out. Something about the "immortal bard of Avon. . . ." On such a fine evening, thought Mr. Weston, the audience would be small. Possibly about fifteen or twenty. There would be Miss Picksley, the secretary, to receive subscriptions for the coming session. Mrs. Hollockshaw would be there to play the hymn on the American harmonium, and Mr. Sly would open with a word of prayer. The Gunter girls would sit on the back row and flirt with the Merridge boys. Possibly old Mrs. Cowburn would turn up. (Or was she dead by this time?) . . . After he had read his paper there would be a few minutes for discussion. That would merely mean votes of thanks, because he would take care not to say anything controversial. Nothing about the Shakespeare-Bacon business. Then the benediction given out by Mr. Sly. With luck the whole business would be over by nine, and there would be time for a stroll through the Forest at dusk. Or perhaps, though, it would be quite dark. Heavens! Only twenty-five to five. Old Clotters was locking up in his room. . . .

A ray of tawdry sunlight penetrated the dust and murkiness of the atmosphere, bringing into prominence the rather obvious fact that Mr. Weston was combining reverie with the observation of his class through the interstices of his fingers. (This was an integral part of Mr. Weston's disciplinary system.) Ever and anon his eyes would focus themselves upon a particular boy in the hope that if he were watched long enough he would do something amiss. This happy consummation was not long in coming. There was that boy Jones! Jones was doing something. Surely, surely! . . . Well, well, perhaps he would do it again. There, he had done it. . . . His jaws had moved perpendicularly twice within ten seconds. There could be no further doubt about it. Jones was eating!

"Jones."

"Yes, sir."

"Are you eating?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I will report you to Mr. Clotters on Monday morning. I will not have this sort of thing going on in my class. Your manners are those of the lower animals. Come up here and put what you are eating into the waste-paper basket!"

§ 5

Punctually at five Mr. Weston locked his desk and prepared to observe the solemn ritual of dismissal. It was in three movements.

"Attention!" called Mr. Weston, and the class looked at him eagerly.

"Stand!" called Mr. Weston, and the class stood. But there must have been some flaw in the standing, for Mr. Weston immediately said, "Sit down again!" They sat down again.

"Now stand!" cried Mr. Weston, after a suitable pause, and this time the manœuvre met with his approval.

"Three!" continued Mr. Weston, and at this mysterious direction the class took a side-step into its respective gangways.

"First row—forward!"

"Second."

"Third."

When the last row had dissolved into the disintegrating chaos of the corridor, Mr. Weston took up his hat and umbrella and walked through the masters' gateway into the frowsiness of Downsland Road. . . .

§ 6

In the hot kitchen of No. 24, Kitchener Road, Mr. Weston made himself some tea and cut some bread and butter. He had not much time to spare. He must add a few pages to his paper. Then he must wash and shave and make himself respectable. During his meal he thought once or twice of those old days when Laura, his wife, had been there to get his tea ready for him, to fuss round the books and papers he brought home, and to say: "Going out to-night, are you? Because if not, there's your slippers. And let's 'ave your dirty boots. . . ." He thought, too, of Catherine: a little child, asking him absurd questions, messing about with his exercise books, begging him for half-used sheets to scribble on. But there was nothing regretful in his thoughts of those past days. On the contrary, he rather inclined to moralize: "I don't know whether I'm not actually better off than I was then. At any rate I'm free, and I can do what I like. It's not so bad, really."

He wrote down a few sentences about Shakespeare.

"That'll have to do," he thought. "It doesn't really matter it being a bit short."

He poured himself out a cupful of hot water for shaving. It was one of the advantages of living alone that he could shave in the kitchen if he liked.

Curiously enough he paused after pouring out the water.

"Shall I or shall I not?" he pondered. He examined his chin in the mirror. "I suppose I'll do," he decided, "it won't be noticed in the gas-light."

Then he saw the water he had poured out.

"Oh, well," he thought, "perhaps I will, after all. . . ."

He took out his razor, one of the old-fashioned kind, stropped it carefully and lathered himself.

While he was shaving he thought: "I wish I hadn't told that boy Jones I'd send him to Clotters on Monday morning. Clotters won't like it much. . . ."

Suddenly, and seemingly without any premeditation, he thrust the soapy razor into his throat, just above the windpipe. . . .

§ 7

At the Duke Street Methodist Schoolroom a select audience of eleven waited until half-past eight for Mr. Weston to deliver his paper on "Shakespeare."

"Perhaps he's ill," suggested Miss Picksley.

"No, he's not, because he was at school this afternoon. My brother's in his class," said one of the Gunter girls.

"Where does he live?"

"Kitchener Road . . . 24 or 25 . . . I forget which."

"Well, it's not far away. Somebody might go round and see. He may have forgotten all about it."

"I'll go," said Mr. Sly, the treasurer.

"I'll come too," said Miss Picksley, who had designs on Mr. Sly.

"We'll all come," chorused the Gunter girls.

"No, don't," said Miss Picksley. "We don't want a crowd. It doesn't look nice."

Through the refuse of a Friday evening's marketing Mr. Sly and Miss Picksley walked to Kitchener Road. They did not mind the walk They did not even go the quickest way.

At No. 26 old father Jopson was standing at the front gate with his monstrous goitre hanging down.

"It must be 24," said Mr. Sly, "because this is 26."

"Yes," agreed Miss Picksley. She walked up to the porch of No. 24 and knocked.

"Does Mr. Weston live here?" enquired Mr. Sly.

Jopson nodded profoundly.

"He must be out," said Miss Picksley.

"Do you know if he's out?" enquired Mr. Sly.

Jopson raised his eyes sagaciously.

" 'E's in, 'cos I seed 'im come in couple 'v ars ago, an' I bin 'ere or in the fron'-rum ever since."

" Perhaps he's in the garden."

" 'E don't go in the gawden nardays."

" Lives by himself, doesn't he ? "

" Yus, lives by 'imself."

" I'm sure he must be out," said Miss Picksley. As unostentatiously as possible she peeped through the letter-box. (She was not quite certain whether this was really a ladylike proceeding.)

" 'E ain't aout, 'relse I should 'a seen 'im go aout."

" His hat and coat are on the hall-stand, too. . . . Perhaps he's ill."

" Try again. Maybe he was in the garden and didn't hear the first knocks."

They tried again, but to no purpose. Eventually they went away in the direction of Cubitt Lane.

" Nine o'clock," said Miss Picksley. " Surely nobody'll be waiting in the schoolroom. I don't think it's much good going back."

" Nor do I," said Mr. Sly. " In fact, we might go for a walk. . ."

Miss Picksley did not object, so they strolled past the King's Arms into the Forest and forgot all about Mr. Weston and his promised paper on William Shakespeare. . . .

§ 8

On Saturday morning at half-past nine the rent-man came to No. 24, Kitchener Road to collect his weekly seven-and-sixpence. His customary treble knock begat no reply. Simultaneously he noticed the milk-can on the step. It was full, and the conclusion was that Mr. Weston was still in bed.

Never as long as the rent-man could remember (and that was a very long time) had the household at No. 24 been asleep at 9.30 on a Saturday morning.

He went his rounds and returned to No. 24 on his way home about ten past one. The milk-can was still there on

the step. Its solitude was now shared by a loaf of bread which the baker had left. Receiving no answer to his knocks, the rent-man went to No. 26. There the garrulous Mrs. Jopson recounted the visit of the two callers on the previous evening.

"They knocked an' knocked an' *knocked*, but couldn't git no anser . . . an' my 'usband swears 'e 'adn't seen 'im go aout."

Eventually it was decided that the rent-man should climb over the fence in Jopson's back garden and effect an entrance into No. 24 by the back way. Jopson, morbidly curious, was to go with him.

You picture this strange couple standing in the tiny back scullery of No. 24, Jopson with his huge face-monstrosity all mottled and pink and shining with sweat, and the rent-man sleek and dapper, fountain-pen behind his ear, receipt-book stuffed in his side pocket.

"Gow on strite through," said Jopson thickly, "it leads inter the kitchin."

Slowly and almost apprehensively the rent-man turned the handle. . . .

CHAPTER VIII

POST-MORTEM

§ 1

It seemed to Catherine the most curious thing in the world that she should be sitting with George Trant inside a taxi. There was no light inside, and only the distant glimmer of London came in through the window. All was dim and dark and shadowy. Yet somewhere amongst these shadows sat George Trant. Perhaps he was thinking that somewhere amongst those shadows sat she, Catherine Weston.

A voice said out of the shadows: "We shan't be long now."

Catherine said: "How far are we going?"

"You're going home . . . to your lodgings, that is. . . . You fainted, I suppose you know. . . ."

"Did I?" And she thought: "He killed himself out of loneliness. He couldn't live without me. I am the cause, I am the reason."

"Feeling all right now?"

"Oh yes . . . must have been the excitement."

"Probably." His voice was cold, unsympathetic. She felt that he was deliberately looking away from where he thought she was.

"You needn't take me all the way, you know. I can walk from the Ridgeway corner."

"I shall take you all the way," he said crisply.

With strange instinct she sensed his antagonism.

"I believe you're angry with me," she said. Yet all the while she was thinking: "I suppose there'll be an inquest and a big fuss and all that. And the furniture and stuff will have to be sold."

No answer.

"You are," she repeated, and was surprised by her own persistence. After all, she didn't care twopence whether he was angry with her or not. Only she would have been gratified if he *were* angry with her. It was something to come into a man's life enough to make him angry. And it was rather an amusing pastime, this flirting with George Trant.

"Perhaps I am," he said coldly.

"Why?" It would interest her to know why. At any rate she might as well know why.

"You've disappointed me."

That was all. It satisfied her. He had evidently been building ideals around her. He had dreamed dreams in which she had been epic and splendid and magnificent. He had thought of her sufficiently for her to have the power of disappointing him. She was gratified. After all, she did not like him, so there was no reason why she should mind disappointing him. And he had paid her the subtle compliment of being disappointed with her.

She did not particularly want to know how she had disappointed him. Yet the conversation seemed incomplete without the question: "In what way?"

She could feel him turning round to face her.

"Various ways," he said vaguely, but his tone seemed to invite her to pursue the subject. For that very reason she kept silent. It was not a matter of sufficient importance for her to ask the same question twice over. And if he *did* want her to repeat her question, that was all the more reason for her not doing so.

After a moment's silence he said: "You've changed a good deal since I last knew you."

"Yes, haven't I?" There was an almost triumphant jauntiness in her voice.

"And you haven't changed for the better, either," he went on.

"That's what *you* say."

"Precisely. That's what *I* say." He was trying to be sarcastic, yet she knew that he was feeling acutely miserable.

There was something in his voice that told her he was feeling acutely miserable. And she had no pity. She was even exhilarated. He was miserable about her. In some way she was invested with the power of making him miserable.

"Oh, I can't tell you——" he began bitterly, and stopped.

A queer thrill went down her spine. For the first time in her life she was conscious of the presence of passion in another person. It was quite a novel experience, yet it called to mind that scene in the Duke Street Methodist Schoolroom when she and Freddie McKellar had come to blows. . . . A flash of realization swept over her. He was in love with her. He was *really* in love with her. She had so often wondered and thought and speculated, and now she knew. His voice had become transfigured, so to speak, out of passion for her. What a pity he could not see her hair! She did not care for him one little bit. She knew that now. She had not been quite certain before, but now, in the very moment of realizing his love of her, she thought: "How funny, I believe I really dislike him. . . . I don't even want to flirt with him again."

Yet she was immensely gratified that he had paid her the terrific compliment of falling in love with her.

A sort of instinct warned her that she should deflect the conversation into other channels. She was immensely interested in this curious phenomenon, yet she feared anti-climax. He might try to kiss her and grope round in the dark searching for her. That would be anti-climax. And also (this came as a sudden shaft of realization) she did not want him to kiss her. Many a time of late she had thought: "What shall I do if he kisses me?" She had resigned herself to the possibility that one day he might kiss her. She had been annoyed at his dalliance. "I wish to goodness he'd do it, if he's going to," had been her frequent thought, and she had provoked him subtly, cunningly, deliberately. . . . Now it came to her as an unwelcome possibility. She did not in the least desire him to kiss her. She knew she would actively dislike it if he did.

"Getting chilly," she remarked nonchalantly, and she

knew how such an observation would grate upon him. She was fascinated by this new miraculous power of hers to help or to hurt or to torture. Every word she said was full of meaning to him : talking to him was infinitely more subtle than ordinary conversation. It was this subtlety that partly fascinated her. For instance, when she said, " Getting chilly," she meant, " We'll change the subject. I know what you're driving at, and I don't like it. It doesn't please me a bit." And what was more, she knew that he would interpret it like that, and that he would feel all those feelings which the expansion of her remark would have aroused.

" I'll shut the window," he said, and did so.

It was so subtle, this business, that his remarks, too, could be interpreted. For instance, his words, " I'll shut the window," meant really, " Is that so ? Well, I guessed as much. You're utterly heartless. I shall have to resign myself to it, anyway. So, as you suggest, we'll change the subject."

The taxi turned into the Bockley High Street.

Catherine was like a child with a new toy. And this toy was the most intricate, complicated, and absorbingly interesting toy that had ever brought ecstasy to its possessor. How strange that he should be in love with her ! How marvellous that there should be something strange and indefinable in her that had attracted something strange and indefinable in him !

And she thought, in spasms amidst her exhilaration : " Probably Ransomes will sell the furniture for me. . . . He killed himself for me. I'm the reason. . . ."

It tickled her egoism that he should have done so. He must have done so. It could only have been that.

Here was George Trant, head over heels in love with her. And here was her father, stupid, narrow-minded, uncompromising bigot, yet committing suicide because she had run away from home. She preferred to regard herself as a runaway rather than as a castaway.

Truly she was developing into a very marvellous and remarkable personage ! . . .

§ 2

As she entered the side door of No. 14, Gifford Road at the improper hour of three a.m., the thin voice of Mrs. Carbass called down the stairs : " That you, Miss Weston ?"

" Yes."

" There's a telegrarf for you on the table. . . .'

" Righto ! " How jaunty ! How delightfully nonchalant ! As if one were used to receiving telegrams ! As if one were even used to arriving home at three a.m. !

Catherine turned the tap of the gas, which had been left burning at a pin-point in the basement sitting-room. Her hand must have been unsteady, for she turned it out. That necessitated fumbling for matches. . . .

The telegram was addressed to the Upton Rising Cinema, and had been handed in at Bockley Post Office some twelve hours before. It ran :

Father had accident. Come at once.—MAY.

Now who was May ?

After much cogitation Catherine remembered an Aunt May, her mother's sister, who lived at Muswell Hill. Catherine had seen her but once, and that was on the occasion of her mother's funeral. She had a vague recollection of a prim little woman about fifty, with a high-necked blouse and hair done up in a knob at the back.

Catherine decided to go as soon as possible the following day. She went quietly to bed, but found it impossible to sleep. She was strangely exhilarated. She felt like a public-school boy on the eve of the breaking-up morning. New emotions were in store for her, and she, the epicure, delighted in new and subtle emotions. Yet even with her exhilaration there was a feeling of doubt, of misgiving, of uneasiness as to the nature of her own soul. Was she really heartless ? How was it she had never grieved at her mother's death ? Try as she would, she could not detect in her feelings for her father anything much more than excitement, curiosity, amazement, even in a kind of way admiration, at what he had done She felt he had

done something infinitely bigger than himself. For the first time in her life she felt towards him impersonally, as she might have done towards any stranger : " I should like to have known that man."

The exact significance of her attitude towards George Trant came upon her. She was playing with him. She knew that. It was not so much in revenge for what had happened long before ; it was from sheer uncontrollable ecstasy at wielding a new and incomprehensible power. She would have played ruthlessly with any man who had been so weak and misguided as to fall in love with her. She knew that perfectly well. Therefore it was a good thing the man was George Trant, for at least in his case she might conceivably justify herself. And yet she knew that justifying herself had really nothing at all to do with the matter ; she knew that there was in her some mysterious impulse that prompted her to do and to say things quite apart from any considerations of justice or justification. Cruel ? Yes, possibly.

She pondered.

No. She was *not* cruel. If she heard a cat mewing in the street she would scarcely ever pass it by. A child crying filled her with vague depression. She was *not* cruel. But she was immensely, voraciously curious, a frantic explorer of her own and other people's emotions, a ruthless exploiter of dramatic possibilities. She had not developed these traits by reading novels or seeing plays or any such exterior means. They were inherent in herself.

Suddenly she remembered the note that had been given her that evening. By the light of a candle she sat up in bed and tore open the thin, purple-lined envelope.

She read :

DEAR MADAM,

Will you come and see me to-morrow (Sunday) at three p.m., " Claremont," the Ridgeway, Upton Rising ?—Yrs., etc.,

EMIL RAZOUNOV.

Razounov !

She actually laughed, a little silver ripple which she

immediately stifled on reflecting that Mrs. Carbass slept in the room below.

Razounov!

Truly she was developing into a very marvellous and remarkable personage! . . .

§ 3

The door of No. 24, Kitchener Road was opened by Mrs. Jopson.

"Do come in," she began effusively. "I've jest bin clearin' up a bit. . . ." Then she added mysteriously: "Of course, they've took 'im away. . . ."

Nothing had seemingly changed in the interior aspect of the house. Her father's overcoat and bowler hat hung sedately as ever upon the bamboo hall-stand. The Collard and Collard piano presented its usual yellow grin as she looked in through the parlour door. Catherine could not explain this yellow grin: there had been something in the instrument's fretwork front with the faded yellow silk behind that had always suggested to her a demoniac leer. Now it seemed to be leering worse than ever. . . . The morning sunlight struck in through the drawn venetian blinds and threw oblique shadows over the grin. Every article in that room Catherine knew almost personally. Even the unhorticultural flowers on the carpet were something more to her than a mere pattern: they were geographical, they held memories, they marked the topography of her earliest days. And the mantelpiece was full of memories of seaside holidays. A present from Southend, from Margate, from Felixstowe, a photograph of Blackpool Tower framed in red plush, an ash-tray with the Folkestone coat-of-arms upon it. . . .

Mrs. Jopson related the story of the tragedy in careful detail. She revelled in it as a boy may revel in a blood-and-thunder story. She emphasized the mystery that surrounded the motives of the tragedy. He had been getting livelier again. Everybody was noticing that. He had been seen smoking his pipe in the Forest on a Sunday morning with the complacency of one to whom life is an everlasting

richness. He had started taking out library books from the Carnegie library. He had even had friends in his house —presumably colleagues from the Downsland Road Council School. And he had bought a gramophone. That was the strangest thing of all, perhaps. What on earth did he want with a gramophone? At one time the gramophone had been his pet aversion. All music bored him, but the sound of a gramophone used to call forth diatribes against the degeneracy of the modern world. . . . And yet it was there, in the tiny front parlour, with its absurdly painted tin horn sticking up in the air and a record lying flat on the circular platform. The record was one of a recent and not particularly brilliant ragtime. Catherine, accustomed professionally to such things, knew it well. And Mrs. Jopson said they had heard that ragtime night after night since he had bought the gramophone. Sometimes it was played over and over again. Really, Mr. Jopson had thought of complaining, only he did not wish to interfere with Mr. Weston's efforts to liven himself up. . . .

When Mrs. Jopson departed and left Catherine alone in the familiar house, the atmosphere changed. The very furniture seemed charged with secrets—secrets concerning the manner in which Mr. Weston had spent his evenings. Whether he had gone out much, or read books or merely moped about. Only the gramophone seemed anxious to betray its information, and the tin horn, cocked up at an absurdly self-confident angle, had the appearance of declaring: "Judge from me what sort of a man he was. I was nearly the last thing he troubled about. I am the answer to one at least of his cravings." From the gramophone Catherine turned to the writing-desk. That at any rate guarded what it knew with some show of modesty. It was full of papers belonging to Mr. Weston, but they all seemed to emphasize the perfect normality of his life. Algebra papers marked and unmarked, catalogues of educational book publishers, odd cuttings from newspapers, notes from parents asking that children should be allowed to go home early, printed lists of scholarship candidates, and so forth. Everything to show that Mr. Weston had

gone on living pretty much as he had been accustomed. Everything to make it more mysterious than ever why he should suddenly cut his throat while shaving. Catherine was puzzled. She had been constructing a grand tragedy round this pitifully insignificant man; under the stimulating influence of her own imagination she had already begun to sympathize; doubtless if her imagination had discovered anything substantial to feed on she might have ended by passionate affection for her own dead father. Several times recently she had been on the verge of tears, not for him personally, but out of vague sympathy with the victim of a poignant tragedy. For to her it did indeed seem a poignant tragedy that a man so weak, so fatuous as he was should be left entirely alone at a time when he most needed the companionship of someone stronger. She did not in the least regret leaving him. That was inevitable. He wanted to boss the show. He was so pitifully weak, so conscious of weakness that he manufactured a crisis rather than yield on what he regarded as a crucial point. Afterwards, no doubt, he had regretted his hastiness. Yet that strange interview on the train to Liverpool Street seemed incapable of being fitted in. . . . Catherine had often thought of him sorrowing, regretting, mourning. She had regarded his suicide as a tragic confirmation of his misery. And now the interior of his writing-desk seemed to say: "Oh, he was much the same—you'd scarcely have noticed any difference in him." And the gramophone chuckled and declared: "As a matter of fact the old chap was beginning to have rather a good time. . . ."

In a drawer beneath the desk she discovered his pocket diaries. Every night before retiring it had been his custom to fill a space an inch deep and two inches across with a closely written pencilled commentary on the day's events. For ten, twelve, fifteen—perhaps twenty years he had done this. Catherine turned over the pages of one of them at random. They contained such items as: "Sweet peas coming up well. Shall buy some more wire-netting for them. . . . Clotters away at a funeral. Did his registers for him. . . . Gave paper on 'Tennyson' to Mutual Impr.

Soc. Have been asked to speak at Annual Temperance Social. . . ." Nearly all the entries were domestic, or connected with Mr. Weston's labours in the school, the chapel or the garden. Catherine searched anxiously for any mention of herself. There were not many. Sometimes a chance remark such as: "C. came with me to chapel . . ." or "C. out to tea." And once the strange entry: "C. been misbehaving. But I think L. knows the right way to manage her." (L. was, of course, Laura, his wife.) . . .

Catherine looked up the entry for November 17th, the day on which she had left Kitchener Road. It ran: "Clotters away again this morning. Had to take IVA in mensuration. Feel very tired. Cold wind. Did not go to night-school."

That was all! No mention of her!

And on the day he met her in the train to Liverpool Street he wrote: "Warm spring sort of day. Went to Ealing to see Rogers. Rogers got a job under the L.C.C. Two boys and a girl. Mrs. R. rather theatrical. . . ." And in the corner, all cramped up, as if he had stuck it in as a doubtful afterthought: "Met C. in train to L'pool St. Seems well enough."

Grudging, diffident, self-reproachful, sardonic, that remark—"Seems well enough." With the emphasis no doubt on the "seems."

Lately the entries had been getting more sprightly.

"Met Miss Picksley to-day. Promised her a paper on W. Shakespeare for the Mut. Impr. Soc. . . ." "Walked to High Wood after chapel. Beautiful moonlight. Saw motor-bus collision in B. High St. coming back. . . ." "Bought gramophone sec. hand off Clayton. £2 10. Like a bit of music. No piano now, of course. . . ."

"Of course."

Catherine was immensely puzzled by that entry. She realized its pathos, its tragic reticence, its wealth of innuendo, yet she could not conceive his feelings when setting it down. For he had never taken any pleasure in her "strumming," as he called it. He had accused her of interrupting his work. He had said: "Not quite so much

noise, please. Shut both doors. . . ." And sometimes he had hinted darkly : " I don't know whether it's you or the piano, but——" And yet he had missed those piano noises. Vaguely, perhaps almost unconsciously, yet sufficiently to make him conquer a carefully nurtured hatred of the gramophone. The gramophone, viewed in the light of this new discovery, was the tangible, incontrovertible evidence of his sense of loss. He had missed her. He had been lonely. He had wanted her to come back. And because of that he had bought a gramophone.

Catherine felt the presence of tragedy. Yet the ingredients were all wrong. Gramophone buying, even in the most extravagant circumstances, does not lend itself to pathostication. And yet, that gramophone—absurd, insignificant, farcical though its presence was—was the evidence of tragedy. Once more Catherine's melodramatic ideals crumbled. Her artistic sense was hurt by the deep significance of that gramophone. She felt a gramophone had no right to be the only clue she had to the tragedy of her own father. She felt humiliated. And then for a swift moment a passion swept over her. The false ideals collapsed into ruins, the sham sentiment, no less a sham because it was not the sham sentiment of other people, the morbid seeking after emotional effect, the glittering pursuit of dramatic situations, tumbled into dust and were no longer worth while. Nothing was left in her save a sympathy that was different from anything she had previously called sympathy, something that overwhelmed her like a flood. It was a pleasurable sensation, this sympathy, and afterwards she tried to analyse the sweet agony it had wrought in her. But at the time she did not realize either its pleasure or its pain, and that is the truest testimony that it was something more real and sincere than she had felt before. Tears welled up in her eyes—tears that she did not strive either to summon or to repress, tears that were the natural, spontaneous outpouring of something in her that she knew nothing about. She did not think in her egoistical, self-analysing way : " What a strange emotion I am experiencing ! " She thought kaleidoscopically of her childhood and girlhood,

and of one particular evening when her father had crept into her room at night and asked her to kiss him. It was terrible to remember that she had replied: "Oh, go away! . . ." Terrible! All her life it seemed to her that her attitude towards him had been—"Oh, go away! . . ." And now he had gone away out of her reach for ever. She sat down in front of the writing-desk with the diary in front of her and cried. She cried passionately, as a child who is crying because by his own irrevocable act something has been denied him. She bowed her head in her hands and gave herself up to an orgy of remorse. She was truly heartbroken.

For a little while.

The transience of her brokenheartedness may be gauged by the fact that on her way home she was strangely elated by a single thought. That thought—occurring to her some half-way down the Ridgeway—was begotten of her old ruthless habit of self-analysis. "I'm not heartless," she told herself. "I can't be. Nobody could have acted as I did who hadn't got a heart. I believe I've got as much heart as anybody, really. . . ."

She was rather proud of the tears she had shed. . . . Delicious to have such proof that she was a human being! Reassuring to find in herself the essential humanities she had at times doubted. Comforting to think that tragedy could move her to sympathy that was more than merely æsthetic. . . . Splendid to know that deep down in her somewhere there was a fount of feeling which she could not turn off and on at will like a water-main. . . .

CHAPTER IX

NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

§ 1

"CLAREMONT," the Ridgeway, was a corner detached house well set back from the road. A high evergreen hedge impeded the view from the footpath, and a curving carriage drive overhung with rhododendron bushes hid all suggestion of a house until the last possible moment. Then all that you saw was a tiny porch and a panorama of low-hanging eaves, diamond window-panes and russet-brown roofs of immense steepness. A telephone bracket affixed to one of the rafters and an electric bell in the porch convinced you that all this parade of antiquarianism was really the most aggressive modernity. A motor-garage, suitably disguised, stood at one side of the house. Behind was a vista of tennis-courts, conservatories, and an Italian pergola.

Beneath the tiny porch in the middle of a hot Sunday afternoon Catherine paused and pressed the button of the bell. She was excited. Her visit savoured of the miraculous. This was the house of the famous Emil Razounov. The famous Emil Razounov had arranged this appointment to meet her. She was actually ringing the bell of Emil Razounov's house. In another minute she and Emil Razounov would be face to face.

A maid opened the door. "What name, please?" she asked pertly, and Catherine replied.

Catherine passed into a wide hall, furnished with all sorts of queer furniture that she contrasted mentally with the bamboo hall-stand and the circular barometer that had graced the hall of No. 24, Kitchener Road. At one side a door was half open, and through this Catherine was

ushered into what was apparently the front room of the house.

It was a long, low-roofed apartment, with dark panelling along the walls and rafters across the ceiling. The furniture was sparse, but bore signs of opulence: there were several huge leather armchairs and a couple of settees. Apart from these there was nothing in the room save a small table littered with music in manuscript, and a full-size grand piano. At first Catherine thought the room was unoccupied, but two winding coils of smoke rising upwards from two of the armchairs—the backs of which were towards her—seemed to proclaim the presence of men.

"Miss Weston," announced the maid, and closed the door behind her.

One of the coils of smoke gyrated from the perpendicular. This was the preliminary to a slow creaking of one of the armchairs. A figure rose from the depths, and its back view was the first that Catherine saw of it. It was tall, attired in a light tweed jacket, grey flannel trousers, and carpet slippers of a self-congratulatory hue. Altogether, it was most disreputable for a Sabbath afternoon. It was difficult to recognize in this the spruce, well-groomed man of the world who had pushed his way into the Forest Hotel on the previous night. Yet Catherine did recognize him, and was rather astonished at her own perception in so doing. He faced her with the graceless langour of one who has just got out of bed at an early hour. Yet in his extreme ungainliness perhaps there was a certain charm. And as for his face—Catherine decided that it was not only lacking in positive good looks, but was also well endowed with extremely negative characteristics. To begin with, the lie of his features was not symmetrical. His hair was black and wiry, lustreless and devoid of interest. The whole plan and elevation of his face was so unconventional that he would probably have passed for being intellectual. . . .

He bowed to her slightly. There was no doubt of his ability to bow. Whether he were ungainly or not, his bowing was so elegant as to savour of the professional. It was consciously a performance of exquisite artistry, as if

he were thinking: "I know I'm ugly, but I've mastered the art of bowing, anyway. Put me in evening clothes, and I'll pass for an ambassador or a head-waiter."

He did not offer his hand.

"Ah," he said, "M'sieur Razounov will be ready in a moment. Please take a seat."

Catherine sat down in one of the easy chairs. From this position she could see that another chair contained the recumbent form of Emil Razounov. He was reading a Sunday paper and taking occasional puffs at a large cigar. Catherine had heard much gossip about Razounov's eccentricities, yet compared with his companion he seemed to her to be disappointingly ordinary. For several moments the two men sat in silence, while Catherine made ruthless mental criticisms. She was piqued at the lack of enthusiasm accorded her.

Suddenly Emil Razounov spoke. The voice came from the depths of the chair like a female voice out of a gramophone horn. It was almost uncanny.

"I say, Verreker, hass not the young lady come?"

The man addressed as Verreker replied somewhat curtly: "Oh yes, she's here."

"Zhen perhaps she weel go to the piano and play."

Catherine left her chair and went to the instrument. Before sitting down she took off her hat—which was a species of tam-o'-shanter—and placed it on the table beside the piano. She did this from two reasons: first, she did not feel comfortable with it on; and second, she was proud of her hair, and conscious that it was the most impressive thing about her.

"What shall I play?" she asked nonchalantly. She could not help betraying her annoyance at her unceremonious reception.

There was a pause. It seemed almost as if both men were struck dumb with astonishment at her amazing question. Then Verreker said carelessly, as if it were a matter of no consequence at all: "Oh, whatever you like."

She took several moments to adjust the music-stool to her final satisfaction and prepare for playing. The time

was useful to decide what she should play. Strange that she should not have decided before! She *had* decided before, as a matter of fact: she had decided to play some Debussy. But since entering the room she had changed her mind. She would play Chopin.

She played "Poland is Lost." She played it well, because she was feeling defiant. She played with the same complete disrespect for her audience as had won her the first prize at the musical eisteddfod. Where she wanted to bang, she banged. She did not care that she was in a low-roofed dining-room and not a concert hall. She did not care if she pleased or displeased them. They were contemptuous of her: she would be contemptuous of them. The result was that she was not in the least nervous. Yet when she had struck the last note she could not help remarking to herself: "I *did* play that well. They *must* have been rather impressed."

An awkward pause ensued. Then Verreker said very weakly: "Thank you." His "thank you" was almost ruder than if he had said nothing at all.

"Well?" said Razounov.

Catherine thought he was speaking to her. She was meditating something in reply when Verreker spoke, showing that the word had been addressed to him. A feeling of exquisite relief that she had not spoken came over her.

"She oughtn't to play Chopin," remarked Verreker.

"No," agreed Razounov.

Catherine's face reddened. It was the subtle innuendo of their remarks that hurt her. Also, by all the standards she had learnt at the Bockley High School for Girls there was something impolite in their criticizing her coolly in the third person as if she were not present. She resented it. She was not a stickler for etiquette, but she would not be insulted. "I don't care who they are," she thought rebelliously, "they've no right to treat me like that. I'm as good as they are, every bit!"

A long pause seemed to intensify the sinister significance of their previous remarks.

"Look here," cried Catherine, breaking in raucously

upon the silence, "why don't you tell me straight out I can't play?"

After she had said it she regretted her hastiness. She perceived it was a foolish thing to say. She blushed fiercely.

Verreker raised his eyebrows ever so slightly. Razounov beamed beatifically.

"My dear lady," he began caressingly, "I will be perfectly fhrank with you. Eet is best to be fhrank, is eet not? . . . You will neffer be a first-class player. Perrhaps a second, ohr a third, pairhaps you may eahrn plenhty of money at eet, but you will never be a—you know what I mean—a ghreat—a suphreme pianiste." (He meant obviously: "You will never be what I am.") . . . "Why? . . . Ah, I cannot tell. Why is zhe ghreat gift given to sohm and not to othairs? . . . Eet is that you haf not it in you, that zohmsing, that spark that is cault ghenius . . . you underrstand?"

Catherine understood. But she could not disguise her humiliation, her mortification, her disappointment.

"Do you agree with me, Verreker?" asked Razounov, as if desiring confirmation of his verdict.

Verreker said curtly: "I don't profess to prophesy these things. Still, in this case, I believe you're right."

That was worse! There was something contemptuous in those words, "in this case." Catherine hated him.

"Still," purred Razounov, "you would imphrove with a course of instruction. You will make a good player if you are careful. I cannot give you lessons myself, as I am engaged all my time, but I will supervise. And Mr. Verreker will gif you a lesson once a week. Efery month I will supervise. Is zhat plain?"

Catherine could not answer. She was struggling with tears. The second time that day that tears had troubled her. Yet what a different variety of tears! These were tears of rage and disappointment, of blinding disillusionment, of sullen mortification. She dare not trust herself to reply. If she had attempted a word she would have been caught in a maelstrom of burning indignation.

"I will drop you a card when I can give you a first

lesson," said Verreker, quietly. . . . " Well . . . er . . . thank you for coming . . ."

Catherine took the hint and put on her hat. She did not say a word as she left the room. But her eyes were furiously blazing: there was in them that danger glint of which Verreker, if he had seen it, would have done well to beware.

Out in the Ridgeway, Catherine decided one thing. She would *never* take lessons off Verreker; she would *never* go near that house again. . . .

§ 2

The fierceness of her indignation brought Catherine face to face with one other thing that she had never hitherto realized. And that was the absurd grandiloquence of her ambition. There was nothing that Razounov has said of which she could legitimately complain. He had even complimented her to the extent of saying that she would make a good player if she were careful, and that she might earn plenty of money as a pianist. Surely that was encouraging! . . . No, it was not. For he had also told her that she was not a genius, and would never be supreme in her art. Well, what of that? Had she ever had the conceited effrontery to think she *was* a genius? Catherine decided no, not exactly that, but . . . The fact was, Catherine, without knowing it, had inclined to give herself the benefit of the doubt. At any rate, she had always been serenely confident of the doubt. Quite unconsciously she had developed an opinion of herself to which there were no adequate frontiers. She was a supreme egoist, and her life had come to be worth living only on false understandings. Every book she read, every speech or sermon she listened to, occasioned in her the feeling: " How does that fit in with me? " At a school prize-giving once the speaker—a local vicar—had given an address to the scholars in which he mentioned the three things which a human being might legitimately desire—fine physique, genius, and strength of character. When he came to the consideration of the second, he said: " Of course, we're none of us geniuses, but——" Catherine (she was only fourteen then) had been rather contemptuous

of this modesty, "Of course, I suppose he *has* to say that, and yet how does he know whether . . ." she had thought. To her his sweeping declaration savoured of the rash. It had been the same on many occasions. Somewhere at the back of Catherine's mind had always been the supposition, so patent as to be almost axiomatic, that she was different from other people. That difference was, on the whole, the difference of superiority. She had done things that no other girl of her age and acquaintance had done. She had left home with five and sevenpence halfpenny, obtained lodgings on her own, and kept herself by work. She had played at concerts (one concert to be precise). A young man who, whatever his drawbacks, was undeniably clever, had fallen desperately in love with her. Her own father, pining of remorse, had cut his throat to prove to her his undying affection. And the invitation to meet Razounov had at first seemed merely a further rung on the ladder of fame. There was no doubt about it: she was marvellous, extraordinary, a constant surprise both to herself and to other people. Her very faults became demi-virtues. Passionate she felt herself to be. After reading *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* her instinctive thought had been: "Am I like Tess?" And she had frequently asked herself the question: "Am I a genius?" and had shirked a plain answer. The crudity of the question, the awful conceit of replying in the affirmative, drove her to subterfuge. "Not exactly that, perhaps," she told herself. "At least, how can I tell? I shall have to wait and see. I can't give a direct answer." Yet if she had been forced to give a direct answer, there is no doubt what it would have been.

And now, disillusioned, humiliated, self-scornful, the preposterous nature of her ambitions forced itself upon her. For the space of half an hour she was perfectly frank with herself. She did not spare that pitiable self-conceit of hers. She was ruthless. It was as if she thought that if she could wound that self-conceit so that it died of its injuries, so much the better. She employed first of all the cold steel of logic. The facts were these. She had

been told frankly that she was not a genius. She was hurt and humiliated. Ergo, she must have been cherishing the notion that she *was* a genius. Absurd creature! Preposterous egoist! Conceited upstart! And all because she had played at a third-rate concert!

She wound up with a bitter piece of advice. You aren't a genius, she insisted, you're just an ordinary girl with as much extraordinariness in her as falls to the lot of most people. And the sooner you finish with your absurd dreams and ambitions and wake up to the facts the better.

It was good advice. She tried conscientiously to take it. She did take it—for about five and twenty minutes.

But those five and twenty minutes were among the most difficult and miserable she had ever spent.

She flung herself down on the bed in the attic at No. 14, Gifford Road, and was so wretched that she could not cry. Besides, she was convinced that there was nothing she had a right to cry about. Yet it was the utter horror, the unbelievable loneliness of existence that appalled her. She was quite alone in her struggle with the world, parentless, almost friendless. She knew now why it was that she had not mourned the loss of her parents, why it was that her solitary struggle had been up to then so exhilarating, so pleasant. It was that absurd faith in herself, that fearful egoism, that terrible conceit, that had enabled her to fight on alone. And now her succour, her comfort, her support had suddenly cracked and given way, and she was left clinging to wreckage. The future was simply blank, a dull, drab hereafter of self-effacement. Life was not worth living. For the first time in all her life she felt alone—alone with the wreckage of dead dreams and shattered hopes. . . .

"O God!" she cried, "if I'm only ordinary after all! . . ."

Horror upon horror! To think of Gifford Road, of the Victoria Theatre, without the conviction that these were but a means to something infinitely higher! Her ultimate triumph provided the only terms on which life amongst these things was worth living! To think of herself as a mere unit in the society that lived in Kitchener Road,

Bockley, in Gifford Road, Upton Rising! To deny herself the privilege of thinking what a good joke it was that she should have been born in Kitchener Road! To realize suddenly that it was no joke at all, but an ordinary, not inappropriate circumstance in which she had no right to discover any irony at all. To regard herself as she knew Mrs. Carbass regarded her, viz. as "the little girl wot plys the pienner at the theayter."

That was where her ruthless self-mutilation overreached itself. She knew she was not as Mrs. Carbass regarded her. Even if she were ordinary, she was not as ordinary as that. With feverish joy she clutched at this undeniable admission. . . . Slowly her spirits rose out of utter dejection. Cautiously at first, then with extravagant recklessness, she flung together the wreckage that had fallen. At the end of five minutes a phantom thought flashed by her—a swift, entrancing, wayward, delicious, undisciplined, seductive idea. It was like a breath of heaven upon her darkened soul. It whispered: "Supposing Razounov is wrong? . . . After all, why the dickens should he be right? . . ."

§ 3

One effect the sudden (but only temporary) shattering of her ambitions had upon her. It redoubled afterwards her efforts to achieve them. She increased the number of hours devoted to practice. She even made some attempt to get through an elementary book on harmony and counterpoint.

And strangely enough, of all the composers whose works she attempted none nerved her to such a fever of determination as Chopin. For she had been told she oughtn't to play Chopin. . . .

On the Wednesday following a card reached her, addressed to the Victoria Theatre. It simply said:

Come at two o'clock on Saturday.

R. Verreker.

The writing was sharply angular, rivalling the phrasing in curtness. Nevertheless, Catherine had expected curtness. Of course she was not going to go. She had long

ago decided that. As if to symbolize her contempt, she tore up the card and threw it into the gutter as she left the theatre. After all, what was the use of keeping it, since she was not going to go ?

All through the remainder of the week she kept fortifying her determination not to go. And yet dimly, in some strange intuitive fashion, at the back of her mind she felt that it was quite possible she *would* go. I won't go, she told herself one moment. Bet you you *do* go, after all. . . . She was surprised, almost fascinated by this charming waywardness of hers. Anyway, she decided, it's quite a simple matter to settle : I won't go. I wonder, she said to herself, smiling.

As a matter of fact she did *not* go. But it was from an absurdly accidental reason. She was strolling along the Ridgeway soon after lunch on Saturday when she suddenly reflected that she did not know what time he wished to see her. Was it two o'clock or three ? She failed to remember, and of course the postcard had been thrown away. At two o'clock she felt she would not run the risk of being an hour too early. Something in her suggested half-past two as a compromise ; but when the half-hour chimed she decided that since that would be wrong in any case she had better wait till three. And at three she felt sure that his card had said two, so she went back to Gifford Road. In a way she was pleased with herself. She had kept her word. She had not gone. The narrowness of her victory seemed to emphasize its magnitude.

At the theatre that evening an introductory film was shown. It dealt with the Napoleonic invasion of Russia. Something in Catherine impelled her to play " Poland is Lost." . .

§ 4

On Monday a letter arrived at the theatre for her. The angular script on the envelope told her who had written it. It ran :

I presume you forgot on Saturday. If so, come on Wednesday at seven p.m.

R. VERREKER.

Catherine was conscious that the struggle was not yet over. On the contrary, it was beginning again. The issue was not, Did she want to go or not? It was, Should she keep the vow she had made to herself? She made a great fuss over weighing both sides of this crucial problem, yet she knew it was a foregone conclusion what the result would be. Then she decided she was giving the matter a place out of all proportion to its importance. After all, it was of little consequence whether she went or not. She would wait till Wednesday, and do just what she felt like at the time.

Then she pondered over the precise significance of his phrase "if so." Did he suspect that her absence on Saturday was not due to forgetfulness?

§ 5

At the inquest on Mr. Weston the usual verdict was brought in: "Suicide during temporary insanity."

Catherine found herself in possession of a houseful of cheap furniture and a sum of twenty odd pounds in the Post Office Savings Bank. She retained a small quantity of clothing and a few kitchen utensils; the rest of the stuff at 24, Kitchener Road was sold by auction. It fetched fifty-five pounds when all expenses had been deducted. She had a horror of hoarding vast quantities of lumber in the form of keepsakes and mementoes, so she destroyed everything that had no intrinsic value except the diaries Those she transported to Gifford Road and kept.

After everything had been settled she found herself the richer by a sum of sixty-eight pounds odd. She kept the eight odd and put the sixty in a bank. It struck her as rather ironical that she should benefit by her father's death. Yet somebody had to have the money, so it might as well be she. With the eight pounds she bought herself some pretty dresses. For the first time in her life she could afford to put the question, "Will it look nice?" before "Will it wear well?" She experienced the keen joy of dressing from the artistic rather than from the strictly utilitarian point of view. She did not believe in "mourn-

ing": her first dresses were reddish brown to match her hair, and white to throw her hair into vivid contrast. Always it was her hair that had to be considered. , . .

When you saw her dressed up you would certainly not call her pretty, but you might confess to a sort of attractiveness. . . .

CHAPTER X

ACCELERANDO

§ 1

She waited fully ten minutes in the drawing-room at "Claremont." "Mr. Verreker will be here directly," the maid had said, and Catherine had time to look about her. It was a lovely May evening: the windows were wide open at the bottom, and from the garden came the rich cloying scent of wallflowers. Somebody was working a lawn-mower

He came in two minutes after the sound of the lawn-mower had ceased. There were scraps of grass about the fringes of his trousers.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he announced briskly.

"Don't mention it," she murmured, with perhaps a trace of sarcasm.

"I oughtn't to, really, ought I?" he then said, "since you kept me waiting an hour last Saturday."

She said nothing, but the atmosphere was definitely hostile.

He asked her what pieces she played. She told him. He took a sheet of paper, and scribbled them down as she recited them. He made no comment till she had said, "and a few others."

"Ambitious!" he muttered, pondering over the list.

"Oh yes, I am, very." She thought she would seize this opportunity of letting him know.

"Well, play the Debussy," he said.

She did so.

"H'm!" he said, when she had finished.

§ 2

After he had told her her faults (which took some time) and given her something definite to practise, the hour was

nearly up, and he gave sundry indications that the lesson was finished.

"By the way," he said, as she was on the way to the door, "*did* you forget last Saturday?"

She might easily have said yes. Or she might have told the strict truth, viz. that she had forgotten the hour he had fixed. But she did neither.

"No," she said, "I just didn't come."

He looked at her very much as Miss Forsdyke had looked at her when she had been impudent.

"Oh!" he replied, with a gesture that might have meant anything. "Well, the next time you intend to 'cut' one of my lessons, drop me a card beforehand, then I shan't be kept waiting for you. My time's valuable."

Curt!

And as she passed the table in the hall he suddenly gathered up a heap of some dozen letters, and said: "By the way, you might shove these in the pillar-box down the road as you go by."

Before she realized the situation the letters were in her hands.

"Thanks!" he replied, opening the front door. "Good evening!"

If she had had the presence of mind she would have flung them all back at him. "I'm not your office-boy," she might have said.

But presence of mind did not come to her till she was half-way down the Ridgeway.

She occupied her time as far as the pillar-box by reading the addresses on all the envelopes. . . .

§ 3

Slowly the perspectives of her life were changing. The old childish ideas and prejudices ceased to apply. In the matter of George Trant, for instance. . . .

It is curious, but the more she realized that she was not in love with him, the more she realized also his essential good nature. At one time he had been a villain of undepictable blackness, and now, in the reaction from this

melodramatic ideal, he appeared perhaps more favourably than he deserved. At any rate, he was to all intents a perfectly honest, well-intentioned young fellow, slightly clever and of prepossessing manner. Whether he had changed, or whether she herself had changed, Catherine could not with certainty decide. But their attitude was fundamentally different from what it had been when Catherine had met him at Bockley Station after her domestic squall. Then he had appeared to her malignant, cruel, desirous of entrapping all innocent girls that came his way. He had been the real villain of the piece. Now it seemed incredible that she could ever have taken him so seriously. For he was a very ordinary young man. The glamour had fallen away from him—that glamour which might have made him a hero, but which, by irony of circumstances, had made him a villain instead. Catherine perceived that it was only her crude idealism that had invested him with Satanic characteristics. She had not a shred of evidence to convict him of ill-treatment of her. The famous note which he had sent her from Manchester, and which she had read on the top of a crowded tram-car, had unfortunately been sacrificed to the dramatic requirements of the situation, but Catherine, only half remembering its contents, had a feeling that if she were to read them in the perspective of several years they would seem wholly inadequate to justify the profound significance she had given them.

It was apparent now to her that George was hopeless as a villain. He said cynical things occasionally, but that was only an affectation. In reality he was a typical example of the rather superior season-ticket holder. His utmost criminality would not transcend the riding of a bicycle without a rear light. . . .

Of course his position was immensely complicated by the fact that he had fallen in love with her. . . .

§ 4

One day (they had met upon the platform at Upton Rising Station) she tackled him directly.

"Look here," she said, "you remember that letter you

wrote me from Manchester? You enclosed it in Helen's letter. *Do* you remember it?"

"Yes," he said.

'What did you mean by it?"

He seemed puzzled.

"Well, it's a long time ago, and I scarcely remember what it was like. . . . I dare say it was rather fatuously clever: I used to think myself a dab hand at letter-writing in those days."

That was as reasonable an explanation as she could have expected. She switched on to another line of questioning.

"You remember that time we were on the balcony at the Forest Hotel—just before the others came up?"

"Yes."

"You—I believe—you were trying to apologize to me—for something. Now, what was it?"

He seemed embarrassed as well as puzzled.

"Well," he began hesitatingly, "of course I may have been wrong—probably I was—but I always understood—I mean I had gathered that—that there had been a sort of—er, misunderstanding between us."

"Why should you apologize for that?"

"Well, if there had been one it might have been my own fault. So I thought I'd apologize——"

"From whom did you gather there had been a misunderstanding?"

"I believe it was Helen who——"

"Oh, I see."

He emboldened himself to start a cross-examination of her.

"May I ask if there ever *was* a misunderstanding?" he said.

Catherine lied, splendidly, regally, with magnificent disdain. It was clearly an opportunity to demonstrate (to herself chiefly) how completely the tables had been turned.

"I'm sure I don't know what the misunderstanding you've been talking about is or was supposed to be. But so far as I am aware there never was such a thing."

He tried to grasp all the significations of this Then he resumed the enquiry.

" Why have you been asking me about these things ? "

" Merely curiosity," she replied, with an undercurrent of implication which said : " Do you suppose for one moment that my reasons could have been any other than those of mere curiosity ? "

Yet he wilfully ignored the implication. All day in the stuffy accountant's office in Leadenhall Street he kept pausing in his work and treating himself to the riotous luxury of the thought : " I don't believe it *was* curiosity. Why should she have asked about that letter ? And besides, Helen sticks to it she *was* in love with me in those days ! After all, it's extremely unlikely it was only curiosity. . . Of course, she had to say it was. She couldn't easily have said anything else. At least . . ."

So that the position was really complicated instead of being cleared up. And Catherine's lie was perhaps excusable. That people should fall in love with her was natural enough, but that she should display a similar weakness was extremely undignified, to say the least. And besides, she was not even sure she *had* been in love with George Trant. Was not there in her an instinct which had said (in effect, if not in so many words) : " This is mere sentimental flapdoodle Wallow as much as you like in its painful ecstasy, but don't imagine for a moment that it's the real stuff . . . ?

§ 5

George Trant was a member of the Upton Arts Club.

In the room over Burlington's Music Emporium the Upton Arts Club met on Sunday evenings at 8.30.

One Sunday during the discussion following a paper on " Cézanne and the Modernists," George drawled sleepily from his armchair by the fire :

" Of course, as a staunch Conservative in politics, I——" A startled hush fell upon the assembly. " Disraelian, I need hardly say," he added, and the amazement was more profound. . . .

§ 6

George Trant was also a member of the Upton Rising Conservative and Unionist Association.

The Upton Rising Conservative and Unionist Association existed from 8 a.m. till 12 midnight every day for the purpose of playing billiards, drinking whisky, and reading sporting newspapers. Occasionally its members would talk politics. It was on one of these comparatively rare occasions (the topic was Mr. Lloyd George's Land Tax) that George announced quietly from behind his evening paper :

" Of course, as a convinced Socialist in the matter of landed property, I——" The elderly white-whiskered gentlemen were thrilled. " Not Marxian, I need scarcely add," resumed George placidly, and the conviction grew that George Trant was a very strange young man.

The Disraelian Conservative and un-Marxian Socialist acquired the reputation of being somewhat bewilderingly clever. . . . The *Bockley Advertiser* reported in full his secondings of votes of thanks. The Arts Club were proud to hear his exposition of " Ibsen : the Man and the Prophet." It was in the days when to read Ibsen was to be modern. And the Conservative Club were never more conscious of their brazen Philistinism than when he talked to them easily of Scriabin and Ravel and César Franck.

" And of course one must not forget the Spanish School. There is a great tendency to ignore the Spanish School nowadays. But it's wholly unfair. Such men as . . . for instance."

Even in politics he could be mystifyingly erudite. A reference to Jeremy Bentham or Ricardo or Huskisson would floor them absolutely. . .

" Queer chap," was their verdict. " Must read a lot, I suppose. . . ." And, content with that explanation, they resumed their billiards or their whisky or their *Pink 'Un*. . . .

§ 7

It happened that upon a certain bright morning in August a smart motor-cycle with side-car attachment went teuf-

teufing along the high road in the direction of the Forest. The side-car was occupied by a girl with violently red hair, and the whole installation was manœuvred by an individual in mackintosh overalls, who was (although you might never have guessed it by looking at him) a Disraelian Conservative and an un-Marxian Socialist. . . .

Catherine, incidentally, was riding in a side-car for the first time in her life.

George, incidentally, was driving a motor-cycle, if not for the first time, at any rate for the third or fourth time in his life. The machine was brand-new. One or two lessons on a friend's motor-bike (to which there was no side-car) had convinced George that he was capable of taking a young lady for a hundred miles' spin in the country without undue risks. Accordingly, he had purchased a machine out of the accumulated savings of several years, and had written to Catherine the following note :

DEAR CATHIE,

I have just bought a motor-bike and side-car. I shall run it round a bit next Saturday, if fine, and should be pleased to take you if you care to come.

And when he had met her (by arrangement) at the corner of the Ridgeway, he had said, offhand :

" You see, there must be somebody in the side-car or else you don't give the thing a fair chance."

And the implication was : " You are nothing but ballast, my dear girl ; a sack of potatoes would have done just as well, only you are more easily procurable."

Somehow the beautiful shining enamelled creature bristling with taps and levers and handles made him talk with a cultivated brusqueness. It was as if the machine occupied the first place in his attentions and she came next. At the moment this may very likely have been true. She seated herself snugly in the torpedo-shaped car, and watched him manipulate levers and buttons. He looked very strong and masculine in his overalls. For several minutes he tried in vain to induce a liveliness in the engine. The policeman on point duty at the corner (who knew

Catherine) smiled ; some street urchins shouted facetious remarks. After five minutes of intense examination he pounced upon an apparently vulnerable part of the mechanism and performed a subtle and invisible operation. Then he pushed off, and the engine woke into clamorous applause. They began to move. The street urchins cheered ironically.

" I thought that would do it," he shouted to her triumphantly above the din, with the air of one who had performed a masterpiece of mechanical surgery.

Yet to himself he blushed. For he had forgotten to admit the petrol from the tank !

§ 8

When they reached Epping, George told himself : " It's absurdly easy to drive a motor-bike and side-car. Absolutely nothing in it. I'll put the pace on a bit between here and Stortford." The thirteen miles to Bishop's Stortford were done in twenty-eight minutes. At Stortford they had early lunch.

Afternoon saw them jostling in and out amongst the crowded streets of Cambridge. They garaged the machine, and went to a café for tea.

§ 9

He was full of a kind of boisterous arrogance.

" Stiff little bit from Stortford. . . . But, of course, we took it awfully slow. . . . Road's not so bad. . . . Ever been on the road from Aberystwyth to Dolgelly ? "

Catherine had not. (Nor had George for that matter.)

" Awful bit of road, that. . . ." (It occurred to him as being a strip of road that might conceivably be awful.)

She could see that he was showing off to her. He was proud of his machine, proud of the white dust on his shoes, of his sun-tanned face, of his goggles, his gauntlet gloves, and his earflaps. He was superbly proud of having piloted himself and her from the corner of Bockley High Street and the Ridgeway to the streets of Cambridge without hitch or mishap. Six hours ago they were in Bockley.

Now they were in a self-sufficing and exceedingly provincial University town, the very antithesis of suburbia. And the miracle was his! His hands, his nerve, his eye had wrought it! He was excusably pleased with himself.

But she was conscious of a curious sense of disappointment. It was now three months since that evening when he had taken her to Gifford Road in a taxi. It was three months since she had divined intuitively that he was in love with her. And during those three months he had been marvellously reticent, exasperatingly discreet. She had almost begun to doubt the reliability of her instinct. And though she knew she did not in the least reciprocate his feelings, she was fascinated by the idea that she was something incalculable and vital to him. Perhaps it was sheer pride of conquest, perhaps it was merely her love of compliments and her extreme gratification at this, the supreme compliment of all. Or perhaps it was just her own inexplicable perversity.

He was anxious to get back before lighting-up time, and she, for no very definite reason, was inclined to prefer a quick run under the cool moonlight. She deliberately delayed him by showing fastidiousness in the selection of a café. Then she got him talking about the Arts Club.

"I hear you're going to speak next Sunday."

"Oh yes—just read a paper, that's all. On Ibsen's *Wild Duck*. . . . Of course, you've read it?"

"I'm afraid I haven't read any Ibsen."

"Really? . . . Oh, you must read him. Awfully good, you know. Stimulating; modern; very modern. *Doll's House*, you know. *Rosmersholm* and *Little Eyolf*. . . . And, of course, *Ghosts*. Absolute biological nightmare—*Ghosts* . . . but terrifically clever. . . . I'll lend you the whole lot if you'll promise to read them."

"Right," she said. And she thought: "Doesn't he like to show he knows more than I know? But if he *is* in love with me it won't matter about that." (And she could not properly have explained that thought either.)

But she kept him talking because she saw it was getting late.

§ 10

On the return journey they stopped to light the lamps at a lonely spot called Stump Cross, some ten miles out of Cambridge. She watched him as he stood in front of the machine with the acetylene glare lighting up his face and his goggles and his earflaps and his gauntlet gloves and his overalls, and, above all, his expression of stern delight They were two solitary figures with hills rolling up and down on either side of them, and nothing in view save dim distant ridges and a gaunt sign-post which said : " To London, by Stortford, 45½ miles."

" We'll put on a spurt," he said, clambering into the saddle. . . .

As they entered the outskirts of Bishop's Stortford at a speed of just over thirty miles an hour the full moon swept from behind a bank of clouds and lay in pools over the landscape. . . .

§ 11

It was in the narrow and congested portion of the main street that something happened. (As a matter of fact they need not have gone through the town at all : there is a loop road, but George was unwilling to tackle a road he had not encountered by daylight.) There is no doubt that George was feeling very conscious of himself as he honk-honked his way through the crowded roadway. It was a Saturday night, and the streets were full. As they swerved round the corner of the George Hotel the huge acetylene beams lit up a sea of faces. Men and women passed them on the kerb as in a dream : girls with bright eyes and laughing faces, and men with the unmistakable Saturday night expression flitted past them shadowlike. It was ecstasy to be swirling past them all at a pace which, though not fast, had just a spice of danger in it. George, in his overalls and headgear, looked like a Viking steering his galley through heavy seas. What was more, he knew he was looking like that, and was trying desperately to look more like that than ever.

And then, at the point where the main highway narrows and begins an S turn, with numerous side-streets complicating the problem, George espied a vehicle proceeding slowly in the same direction as he. It was a market-booth on four wheels, shuttered up at the sides, returning to its stabling after the night's market. On the side in painted crimson lettering ran the inscription: "H. Bullock. Temperance Liquors and Fruit Beverages." The whole was drawn by a tired, meditative horse. The existence of this equipage in the middle of the road created a problem. George was rapidly overtaking it, and of course he should have passed by on the right or off-side But that would have meant checking pace and honk-honking vigorously to clear people out of the way. Whereas he was driving close to the kerb and could see a space between it and the vehicle which seemed ample for passage. Besides, it was rather stylish to "nip in" between vehicles and the kerb. People would stare back at him and mutter, "Reckless fellow!" and by the time they had resumed their walk he would be on the outskirts of the town. Accordingly, summoning his features for an intensely Viking expression, he decided to "nip in." The road was narrowing, and he knew he would have to put on a spurt. The accelerator moved, and they went forward with a bound. Blurred mists of passing faces swept by along the kerb. . . . There was a sudden jar. The side-car wheel had mounted the pavement, which was here only an inch or so above the roadway. Nevertheless, no harm had yet been done. And then the appalling vision of a lamp-post seized hold of George and wrought havoc with his presence of mind. That lamp-post obsessed him, possessed him, threw him into inarticulate terror. That lamp-post would slice off the wheel of the side-car as a scythe cuts grass. It was therefore necessary at all costs to avoid that lamp-post. With a mighty sense of the tremendous issues that hung upon the merest fractional movement of his hands, George swerved to the right. Even as he did so he could almost feel the sickening impact of the lamp-post. He waited for what seemed a long minute—waited for the sudden jar

and shiver and crumple. Strange to say it did not come. . . . Then with a feeling of overwhelming relief he perceived that the obstacle had been passed. The lamp-post was already behind him, an unsuccessful syren baulked of its prey. Exquisite moment! Colossal thrill! Magnificent piece of steering! And then . . .

A sudden grind of the front wheel, a sort of convulsive jerk which threw him sideways on top of the side-car, and a medley of snapping and shivering and crumpling sounds. Then (it seemed an age before he mastered the situation) he shouted to Catherine, whose ear was not so very far from his mouth: "By Jove, we must have cannoned into that cart!"

His voice was as the voice of one who is immensely interested in a subtle and curious phenomenon. . . .

§ 12

George was distressed.

He and Catherine were slowly walking to Bishop's Stortford railway station. The Viking expression had left his features; the motor-cap and goggles and overalls and gloves were tied up in a brown-paper parcel which he carried under his arm. Also, his face was very dirty.

Terrible things had happened to him.

A couple of policemen had taken his full name and address, and made copious entries in note-books.

Mr. H. Bullock had sworn vividly. In trying to estimate the extent of damage to his front wheel George had tactlessly turned the full glare of the acetylene lamp upon the horse's eye. The horse had hitherto been uncertain whether the situation justified panic flight or not; now he decided swiftly in the affirmative. He rushed forward precipitately, and in less than a dozen yards had smashed off the wheel of the cart against a pillar-box. The cart sagged despairingly, and streams of bilious lemonade poured through the flooring. Mr. Bullock's language became terrific.

And then one of the policemen had said: "By the way, got your licence?"

George had blushed (though the fact that he was already a deep red disguised the phenomenon).

"I'm afraid—I—I must have left it at home," he stammered weakly, diving into his inside pocket and fishing amongst letters and papers.

Yet both Catherine and the policeman knew in that moment that he had not got a licence at all. Something in his voice told them.

And what is more, George knew that both the policeman and Catherine were aware that he had not got a licence at all. Something in their eyes told him.

And then George had wilted under the vivid abuse of Mr. H. Bullock. Spectators called out monotonously: "You were on the wrong side of 'im." "You was goin' too fast." "You didn't orter 'ave come nippin' in like thet." "On the kerb 'e was, a minute before—don't know 'ow to drive, 'e don't." "Didn't orter be trusted, them sort of cheps." "Swervin' abart like anythink: shouldn' be surprised if he's drunk."

And a fierce clergyman in a three-inch collar floored George with the remark: "You ought to be in jail, my man. You are a pest to society."

And then George had to push the battered machine into a garage (which was fortunately at hand), and pay exorbitantly for leaving it there. The garage proprietor was subtly sarcastic to George.

Then George came back to parley with the policemen. The crowd became hostile. George rather unwisely began to divest himself of his motoring garments. Facetiousness prevailed. Catherine was the subject of much speculation.

"I wouldn't trust myself to 'im no more," remarked a bystander. And another wanted to know if her mother knew she was out. (It was in the days of that popular song.)

"'E's a-tryin' to murder you, that's wot 'e is," said a sour-faced spectator. "'E's found another gal, an' wants ter git rid of you."

And an elderly man with a bizarre sense of humour said: "You look out for yerself, my gal; 'e won't 'ave no money ter marry you on w'en 'e's pide 'is fines."

George caught the sally, and the whole phantasmagoria of the police-court flashed across his mind. Also the fact that this trip to Cambridge was likely to leave him with very little, if any money at all. . . .

§ 13

And now, on the slope leading up to the railway station, George was distressed. He was physically and mentally unmanned. He could not speak without a tremor. He seemed so physically enfeebled that she took his arm and asked him to lean on her. All at once she realized the extraordinary fact that of the two she was infinitely the stronger. With all his self-confidence and arrogance and aplomb, he was nothing but a pathetic weakling.

The hostility of the crowd had made her vaguely sympathetic with him. She had watched him being browbeaten by policemen and by the owner of the cart, and a strange protective instinct surged up in her. She wanted to stick up for him, to plant herself definitely on his side. She felt she was bound to champion him in adversity. She thought : " I'm with him, and I must look after him. He's my man, and I've got to protect him."

All the long walk to the station was saturated in this atmosphere of tense sympathy and anxious protection.

" We shall catch the 10.20," he said. " There's heaps of time. We shall have over an hour to wait."

" That'll be all right," she said comprehensively.

On the station platform they paced up and down many times in absolute silence. The moon was gorgeously radiant, flinging the goods yard opposite into blotches of light and shadow. The red lamps of the signals quavered ineffectually.

" You know it's awfully lucky you weren't hurt," he said at last.

She nodded. Pause.

Then he broke out : " You know, really, I'm most awfully sorry——"

" Oh, don't bother about that," she said lightly. " It wasn't your fault. You couldn't help it."

(Yet she knew it *was* his fault, and that he *could* have helped it. She also knew that he had no licence.)

And then a strange thing happened.

They were in the shadow of a doorway. He suddenly put his two arms on her shoulders and kissed her passionately on the lips. Her hair was blowing behind her like a trail of flame. He kissed her again with deepening intensity. And then her face, upturned to his, dropped convulsively forward. Her eyes were closed with a great mist, and her hair fell over his hands and hid them from view. There was something terrible in the fierceness with which he bent down and, because he could not kiss her face, kissed her fire-burnished hair. And as he did so again and again she began to cry very softly. His hands could feel the sobs which shook her frame. And he was thrilled, electrified. . . .

"My God!" he whispered. . . .

. . . Then with a quick movement she drew back. The tears in her eyes were shining like pearls, and her face was white—quite white Passion was in every limb of her.

"That's enough," she said almost curtly, but it was all that she could trust herself to say. For she was overwhelmed, swept out of her depth by this sudden tide.

And all the way to Liverpool Street, with George sitting in the corner opposite to her, her mind and soul were running mad riot. . . .

"Good-bye," he said later, at the gate of No. 14, Gifford Road, and from the inflexion of his voice she perceived that their relations had undergone a subtle change. . . .

She watched him as he disappeared round the corner. On a sudden impulse she raced after him and caught him up.

"George!" she said.

"Yes?"

"Will you be summoned, d'you think?"

"Oh, certainly."

"Well—I thought I'd tell you . . . if you're short of money through it . . . I've got some. . . . I can lend it to you . . . if you're short, that is. . ."

"It's awfully good of you," he replied. Yet she knew he was thinking of something else. . . . Her running back to him had reopened the problem of farewell. He was debating: "Shall I kiss her again?" And she was wondering if he would. In a way she hoped not. There would be something cold-blooded in it if he did it too frequently. It would lack the fire, the spontaneity, the glorious impulse of that moment at Bishop's Stortford railway station It would assuredly be banal after what had happened. She was slightly afraid. She wished she had not run back to him. Nervousness assailed her.

"Good-night!" she cried, and fled back along Gifford Road. Behind her she heard his voice echoing her farewell and the sound of his footsteps beginning along the deserted highway. It was nearly two a.m. . . .

Undressing in the tiny attic bedroom she discovered a dark bruise on her right shoulder. It must have been where he lurched sideways against her just after the collision. She had not felt it. She had not known anything about it. . . .

CHAPTER XI

THE SECOND TRANT EPISODE

§ 1

It was November.

They had been engaged three months. Three months it was since a certain winedark evening when, in the shadows of the heavy trees on the Ridgeway, he had suddenly said :

" I suppose we *are* engaged ? "

" Are we ? "

" Well, I think it'll be all right. . . . I told my father, and he didn't object. . . . Will you come to tea on Sunday ? "

She perceived that their relations had entered on a new phase.

" If you like," she said.

And he had kissed her good-bye that evening.

The Sunday had been nerve-racking. She felt she was on show. Many years it was since she had entered the Trants' house. In those early days she had come in as Helen's school friend, and nobody had taken much notice of her. Mr. Trant had chattered amiable trivialities and chaffed her about her red hair. Now all was immensely different. She was George's *fiancée.* She had to be treated with deference. Mr. Trant discussed the weather and gardening and (to the utmost extent of his capabilities) music. Mrs. Trant was effusively embarrassed. Helen was rather frigid. After tea they went into the drawing-room. Catherine and Mrs. Trant sat for some time together on the couch turning over the pages of a photograph album with careful enthusiasm. In it were portrayed the Trant

family in various stages of development—the Trant family when it had anybody distinguished to stay with it for the week-end ; the Trant family at the door of its house, on Llandudno Pier, at Chamounix, on the promenade deck of a P. and O. liner, and in other less idyllic positions ; the Trant family taking tea on the lawn, picnicing in Epping Forest, about to set out for a motor spin, skating on the Connaught Waters at Chingford, playing tennis (*a*) on its own grass court, (*b*) on its own rubble court ; the Trant family in fancy dress, evening dress, riding dress, Alpine dress, and every other kind of dress—in short, the Trant family in every conceivable phase of its existence. Also the Trant family individually, collectively, and in permutations and combinations. With studious politeness Catherine enquired from time to time as to the identity of the various strangers who obtruded themselves upon the Trant arena. Here were Sir Miles Coppull (the American camphor king, holding a tennis-racket jauntily) ; the Rev. R. P. Cole (President of the Baptist Association) ; the Rev. St. Eves Bruce, M.A., D.D. (headmaster of George's old public school), beaming on Helen, by the way ; not to mention groups of fierce old gentlemen whom Mrs. Trant lumped collectively as " some of Dad's directors." . . .

Catherine thought : " Some day I shall be amongst all that lot. . . "

George suggested she should play a piano solo, and she tried a Beethoven symphony movement. But she was unaccountably nervous, and a valuable but rather gimcrack china and ivory model of the Taj Mahal at Agra which was placed on top of the closed sound-board *would* rattle whenever she played the chord of E flat or its inversions.

When she stopped playing Mr. Trant said : " Let me see, is that Beethoven ? " (He pronounced the first syllable to rhyme with " see " and the second with " grove.")

" Yes."

" Charming little thing," he said vaguely. . . .

Catherine was glad when the advent of chapel time brought the business to a conclusion. For it *was* business.

She could see that. She was being sized up. When she had gone they would discuss her. They were reckoning her up. They were not surprised at her nervousness. They expected it. They were speculating upon her possibilities as a daughter-in-law. . . .

There was only one thing perhaps which did not occur to them, or which, if it did, received less attention than it deserved.

Catherine was reckoning *them* up. She was keenly critical of everything they said and did. And when Mr. Trant, shaking hands with her at the door, said: "You must come again for a musical evening some time, and give us some more Beethoven," Catherine replied:

"Oh yes, I should be delighted. I'm awfully fond of Beethoven, aren't you?"

But she pronounced it "Bait-hoaffen."

There was just the merest possible suggestion of rebuke, of self-assurance, of superiority in that. . . .

§ 2

And now all these things were stale by three months.

By this time she had got used to having tea on Sundays at the Trants' house. She was so much at home there that she could say: "Oh, *do* you mind if I shift this Taj Mahal thing while I play? It rattles so." After a little while they learned her fancies, and had it always removed when she came.

And she was used to George. Everything of him she now knew. His hopes, his dreams, his peculiarities, his vices and virtues, the colours of all his neckties—all had been exhaustively explored during the course of many a hundred hours together. He kissed her now every time they met—he expended much ingenuity in arranging times and places suitable for the ritual. Sometimes, after he had seen her home from the theatre, his kisses were hurried, stereotyped, perfunctory, as purely a matter of routine as putting two pennies into the machine and drawing out a tube ticket. On other occasions, as for instance when they strolled through country lanes at dusk, she could

sense the imminence of his kisses long before they came. When they turned down Cubitt Lane towards the Forest at twilight it was tacitly comprehended between them: "We are going in here to be sentimental. . . ." When they returned the mutual understanding was: "We have been sentimental. That ought to last us for some time. . . ."

People deliberately left them alone together. They looked at the two of them as if they were or ought to be bliss personified. They seemed to assume that an engaged couple desires every available moment for love-making. At meal times, for example, it was always contrived that George should be next to Catherine. Once when Mr. and Mrs. Trant had made the excuse that they would stroll round the garden, Catherine, noticing that Helen was about to follow unobtrusively, said sharply:

"Please don't go, Helen. I want you to try over a few songs."

Catherine wondered if Helen understood.

The fact was, being engaged was deadly monotonous. It had no excitement, no novelty. Everything was known, expected, unravelled. When she met George at a concert she did not think: "I wonder if he has come here on *my* account." She knew beyond all question that he had. When at some social function she saw him chatting amongst his male friends she did not think: "Will he come up and speak to me or not?" She knew that his very presence there was probably on her account, and that he would leave his male friends at the first available opportunity. And when they had ices at a tiny table in some retiring alcove it was not possible to think: "How funny we should both have met like this! How curious that we should be alone here!" For she knew that the whole thing had been premeditated, that the alcove itself had probably been left attractively vacant for their especial benefit. There was no point, no thrill, no expectancy in asking the question: "Is it really *me* he comes to all these places for?"

He had declared his passion in unequivocal terms that left nothing to be desired. That was just it: there was nothing left to be desired. She would rather he had been

ambiguous about it. And occasionally the awful thought came to her: "If this is being engaged, what must it be like to be married? . . ."

Life was so placid, so wearyingly similar day after day, evening after evening. Every night he met her at the stage-door of the theatre and escorted her home. Every night he raised his hat and said "Good evening!" Every night he took her music-case off her, and they walked arm-in-arm down the High Street. Their conversation was always either woefully sterile or spuriously brilliant. On the rare occasions when they had anything particular to talk about they lingered at the corner of Gifford Road. But she could not confide in him. To tell him of her dreams and ambitions would be like asking for a pomegranate and being given a gaudily decorated cabbage. Their conversations were therefore excessively trivial: she retailed theatrical and musical gossip, or, if the hour were very late and she were tired, as frequently happened, she replied in weary monosyllables to his enquiries. She found her mind becoming obsessed with hundreds of insignificant facts which by dint of constant repetition he had impressed upon her. She knew the names, histories, characters, and family particulars of all the men who worked with him in the stuffy little basement of the accountant's office in Leadenhall Street. She knew the complicated tangle of rivalries and jealousies that went on there—how Mr. Smallwood did this and Mr. Teake did that, and how Mr. Mainwaring (pronounced Mannering) frequently lost his temper. She knew all the minutiæ of George's daily work and existence, the restaurant he frequented for lunch, the train he caught on the way home, the men he met day after day in the restaurant and on the trains. Nothing of him was there which she did not know. . . .

Yet it was all so terribly, so tragically dull. Even his brilliance palled. His brilliance was simply an extensive repertoire of smart sayings culled from the works of Ibsen, Shaw, Chesterton, etc. In three months she had heard them all. Moreover, he had begun to repeat some of them.

Out of a forlorn craving for incident she quarrelled with him from time to time. His genuine sorrow at the estrangement and his passionate reconciliation afterwards thrilled her once or twice, but after a few repetitions became stale like the rest. Undoubtedly he was in love with her.

And she ?

§ 3

Doubtless one of the reasons why George's engagement to Catherine was not opposed very vigorously by the Trants was Catherine's startlingly rapid musical development, which seemed to prophesy a future in which anything might be expected. Ever since that Conservative Club concert Catherine had been playing regularly in public and acquiring a considerable local reputation. Occasional guineas and two guineas came her way, and at the opening of the winter season she found herself with as many engagements as she could manage. And at a local musical festival she had come out on top in the professional pianoforte entries. A gold medal and a good deal of newspaper prominence were the visible and immediate results of this. Afterwards came the welcome discovery that she was in demand. A concert organizer offered her five pounds for a couple of solos. An enterprising and newly established photographer photographed her gratis and exhibited a much embellished side view (with a rather fine hair exhibition) in his window. And she ceased to play at church socials. . . .

Every Saturday afternoon she went to Verreker for lessons. Though she disliked him personally, she was compelled to admit the excellence of his teaching. He spared her no criticism, however severe, and when he commended her work, which was rare, she knew he meant it. If a good teacher, he was also an irritating one. He selected her pieces, insisted on her learning those and no others, expected from her a good deal more than it seemed possible for her to give, and treated her generally as a rebellious child. He was always asking her when she was going to resign her position at the theatre. She would

never be even a moderate pianist as long as she was there, he said.

The time came when it was of financial benefit to her to resign. She did so, and expected him to be very pleased with her. But he merely said :

" H'm ! I suppose you waited till it paid you to."

This was so true that she had no reply ready.

He never disguised from her the fact that, however seemingly she might be advancing on the road to fame and success, she would never become more than a second-rate virtuoso.

" The front rank of the second-raters is as high as you'll ever get," he said. But that did not hurt her now.

What did hurt her was once when he said : " You have one abominable habit. You pose with your hair. I should recommend you to have it cut off, then you won't have it to think about so much."

" Oh, *should* you ? " she replied angrily. " I *should* be sensible to cut it off, shouldn't I, seeing it's the only good-looking part of me ! "

She hadn't meant to say that. It slipped out.

" Is it ? " he said, and for a single fatuous second she had a wild idea that he was going to pay her a magnificent compliment. But he added : " I mean—it never struck me as particularly good-looking. But then I'm no judge of hair—only of music."

She could discern in every inflection of his voice latent hostility. There was no doubt he disliked her intensely. Latterly, too, she had become increasingly conscious of a mysteriously antagonistic atmosphere when he was with her. It reacted on her playing, causing her at times to give deplorable exhibitions. It was not nervousness. It was something in him that was always mutely hostile to something in her. The sensation, at first interesting, became extraordinarily irksome after a while. Once, when a poor performance of one of Chopin's Ballades had evoked sarcasm and abuse almost beyond endurance, she suddenly left the music-stool and stood facing him with her back to the instrument,

"It's no good," she cried vehemently. "It's not *my* fault. I've never played as bad as that in my life. It's *you*. I can't play when you're present. Don't know—can't explain it, but it is so."

He looked surprised.

"Very strange," he said reflectively—"and unfortunate."

She had expected him to be witheringly sarcastic. But he took it with urbane philosophy.

"Well," he said, "I suppose if you feel like that it can't be helped. We shall simply have to make the best of it."

Which was irritatingly logical. . . .

§ 4

In the Trant household the musical evening was an institution. Rarely a month passed by unhonoured by one of these functions. Commencing at seven or thereabouts on a Saturday evening, they lasted till past midnight. They possessed a regular clientele of attenders, as well as a floating population of outsiders who had never been before and who (from more reasons, perhaps, than one) might never come again. The drawing-room at "Highfield" was large, but it never comfortably held the miscellaneous crowd that assembled in it on the occasion of these musical evenings. In winter you were either unbearably hot (near the fire) or unbearably cold (near the window), and in summer, without exception, you were always unbearably hot. Moreover, you were so close to your neighbour on the overcrowded settee that you could see the perspiration draining into her eyebrows. From a dim vista obscured by cigarette smoke there came the sound of something or other, indescribably vague and futile, a drawing-room ballad sung by a squeaky contralto, a violin solo by Dvořák, or a pompous Beethovian hum on the piano. However beautiful and forceful might be the music, it was always vague and futile to you, because you were watching your neighbour's eyebrows act as a sponge to the down-trickling perspiration. . . . Always in these musical evenings there was banality. Always beauty was obscured by bathos. And could you ever forget the gymnastic evolutions of a

setteeful of musical enthusiasts balancing cups of steaming hot coffee on their knees? . . .

The day before Christmas Day was a Saturday. For Christmas Eve a musical evening had been arranged—a musical evening that, out of deference to the season, was to surpass all previous undertakings of the kind. Catherine was invited, and would, of course, be one of the principal performers. In virtue of her intimate relation to George she had come early in the afternoon and stayed to tea. Her usual weekly lesson from Verreker was cancelled for this particular week, probably owing to Christmas. So she would be able to spend the entire evening at "Highfield." She was in buoyant spirits, chiefly owing to her rapidly advancing fame as a pianist. She had the feeling that her presence at the Trants' musical evening was an act almost of condescension on her part, and it pleased her that the Trants treated her as if this were so. She would undoubtedly be, in music-hall parlance, the star turn of the evening. People, unknown aspirants after musical fame, would point her out as one who had already arrived at the sacred portals. She knew also that Mrs. Trant had been sending round messages to friends that ran more or less after this style: "You simply *must* come to our musical evening on Christmas Eve! It is going to be an awfully big affair, and we have got Cathie Weston coming down to play—you know, the girl who——"

The whole business tickled Catherine's vanity.

In the interval between tea and seven o'clock she superintended the arrangement of the piano in the drawing-room, taking care that the light from an electric hand-lamp close by should shine advantageously on her hair while she was playing. She decided that she would play one of the Chopin Etudes. . . .

§ 5

At a quarter past seven the room was full. According to custom visitors introduced themselves to one another, the crowd being altogether too large for ceremonious introductions. Late-comers came in quietly and unostenta-

tiously, sitting down where they could and nodding casually to people they knew. The lighting was æsthetically dim, being afforded by a few heavily-shaded electric hand-lamps scattered promiscuously on tables and bookcases. Every available corner was occupied by extra chairs brought in from other parts of the house, and the central arena in front of the fireplace was a dumping-ground for music-cases, 'cellos, violins, etc. Catherine occupied a roomy armchair next to the fire, and was conscious that she was being looked at attentively. A red-shaded lamp on the end of the mantelpiece threw her hair into soft radiance, but its effect on her eyes was so dazzling as to throw all around her into an impenetrable dimness in which she could discern nothing but the vague suggestion of persons and things. George sat next to her, and from time to time passed remarks to which she replied vivaciously, conscious that every movement of her head brought into prominence the splendour of her hair. (Of late she had been paying considerable attention to her hair: a visit to a West End coiffurist had produced startling results.)

The evening crawled monotonously on. Log after log of crackling pine was placed on the open fire-grate; song followed song, violin, 'cello, mandoline each had its turn; a girl recited "The Dandy Fifth" in a way that was neither better nor worse than what Catherine felt she could have done herself, and Mr. Trant's deep voice could be heard constantly above the periodic applause: "Charming little thing that." "Is that one of Bach's?" (pronounced "Back's"). "Very pretty, isn't it? Rather nice words, don't you think?"

The order of performance was not definite. Catherine did not know when she might be asked. Of course, she had not a trace of nervousness. She had lost that completely now after constant appearances on public concert platforms. And this was only a drawing-room affair: there were no musical critics frowning in the front row, there was probably nobody in the room who would know if she played a false note. Besides, she would *not* play a false note. She smiled contemptuously as she heard the

applause evoked by a timid rendering of a drawing-room ballad. She had an unmitigated contempt for these drawing-room ballads. Her theatrical experience had given her an intense hatred of cheap sentimental music of the kind sold in music shops at one-and-sixpence a copy. The particular song that had just been sung was of this class: its title was monosyllabic, and its music composed with an eye to vamping the accompaniment. . . .

"That's a nice little thing," said Mr. Trant. "I don't believe I've heard it before, either. . . . Reminds me of something, though . . . I can't think what. . . ." Then in the blurred distance she could discern Mrs. Trant's white frocked form travelling swiftly across the room and engaging in conversation with somebody unseen.

"Oh, please," she heard, "please do! Everybody would be so glad. Helen, do persuade him. Really——"

The rest was drowned in the tuning of a violin.

Then Mrs. Trant, returning to her seat, whispering to her husband, getting up, standing with her back to the corner of the piano, and announcing:

"We are now to have a pianoforte solo"—impressive pause; Catherine guessed what was coming—"by Mr. Ray Verreker!"

Catherine had guessed wrong. . . .

§ 6

But it was his presence there which startled her. Why was he at such a gathering? She knew his stormy contempt for the kind of musical suburbinanity that flourished in Upton Rising: it was his boast that he never attended a local concert and never would. "Suburbinanity"—that was his own word for it. She knew his fierce hatred of the kind of things that had been going on for over an hour—that particular violin piece by Dvořák, for instance, was anathema to him. She knew also his passionate intolerance of mediocrity of any kind. She could imagine his sensations when listening to that girl's rendering of "The Dandy Fifth." The puzzle was, why had he come? He knew the kind of thing it would be. He must have known the in-

evitable ingredients of a suburban musical evening. And yet he had come. He had conquered his detestation for social gatherings of this kind so far as to come. It was rather extraordinary, completely uncharacteristic of him.

To Catherine, always the egoist, came the thought: "Has he come here because he knew I should be here?" Yet even a second thought dismissed that idea as unwarrantly absurd. That would be rather an additional reason for his staying away. For every Saturday that she visited him convinced her more and more that he despised her and her ways.

And she also thought: "Will the effect of his being present make me play badly?" She did not know in the least whether it would or not, for the circumstances were so completely different from what they were at "Claremont." Here she might possibly be able to forget he was in the same room with her. Certainly he would not be at her elbow, turning over the music pages with gestures that conveyed to her perfectly the sensations of disgust that he was experiencing. . . .

But he was playing. Her surprised speculations were immediately cut short by the sound of the piano. She could see his fingers travelling magically over the keys and his strange, grotesque face looking vacantly over the top of the instrument. He looked different from usual. It was probably the unaccustomed angle from which she was watching him, for his features, perfectly unsymmetrical, presented an astonishing variety of aspects. . . . She suddenly forgot to look at him. Something that he played had thrilled her. A swift chord, passing into a strange, uncouth melody set all her nerves tingling. What was this piece? . . . He went on through swirling cascades of arpeggios in the right hand, falling octaves, crashing chords, and then, once again, this strange uncouth melody, the same, but subtly altered. Tremendous, passionately barbaric, was this thing that he was playing. It seized hold of her as if it had suddenly given the answer to all her wants and desires: it stretched out clear and limitless over the furthest horizon she had ever glimpsed; it held all the

magic of the stars. And far ahead, further than she had ever dared to look before, lay the long reaches of boundless, illimitable passion . . . passion . . . passion . . . that was what it was. . . . Her hands twitched convulsively on the sides of the chair. She was caught in a great tide ; it was sweeping her further and further outward and onward ; she wanted to cry out but could not. Tears were in her eyes, but they would not fall. And for the first time that evening she forgot the pose of her head and hair. . . .

Applause was to her the waking from a dream. They were applauding. A fierce storm of contempt for them overtook her, because she knew they had not heard and seen and felt what she had heard and seen and felt. Their applause was banal, atrociously commonplace. Even in mere volume it did not exceed that which had been accorded to the song with the monosyllabic title or to "The Dandy Fifth." And Catherine, vaguely annoyed that there was any applause at all, was also vaguely angry that it had been so indiscriminating. She did not applaud herself, but she heard George clapping almost in her left ear, and she shot a curious glance at him. She was thinking : "How much of it has meant anything at *all* to you ? "

And then she heard Mr. Trant's deep, suave voice : "What did you say that was ? Peculiar piece, but awfully pretty."

Verreker mentioned a title she could not hear. George had apparently caught something. He whispered to her in spasms :

"Jeux—something or other, I think he said. French, I suppose. Modern French. Debussy school, you know. Oh, it's 'Jeux d'Eaux.' I heard him say it again. 'Jeux d'Eaux,' that's what it is. . . . One of Ravel's things, you know." . . .

§ 7

Verreker returned to his seat. There followed a baritone song of the rollicking variety, a 'cello solo, and then Mrs. Trant called for a "pianoforte solo by Miss Catherine Weston."

Catherine rose languidly, and picked her way amongst the violins and music-stands to the piano. She screwed the stool an inch or so higher (it being a point of honour with her always to make some alteration, however slight, in the seating accommodation provided for her), then she lowered the music-rest and slid it back as far as it would go. Her first piece was to be the "Butterfly" Study in G flat (Chopin), so she gently ran her hands arpeggio-wise along the tonic and inversions of G flat. Having done this she paused, chafed her fingers delicately, and tossed her head. The lamp at her side shone on her magnificent hair, throwing her face and bust into severe profile. It was then that she noticed a slight commotion in the far corner of the room. A man was disengaging himself from the closely-wedged throng and proceeding to the doorway. As he passed the fireplace the flames flickered brightly round a log of wood just placed on the fire. Catherine in a swift glance saw that it was Verreker. . . . Carefully he wound his way to the door and passed out.

Catherine flushed Her hands commenced to play, but her whole being was tingling with anger. She was conscious that everybody in the room had noticed his ostentatious withdrawal and was drawing conclusions from it. Everybody knew she took lessons from him. His going out of the room at that moment was nothing less than a deliberate insult offered to her in front of everybody. In the half-shadows round the piano she could see the faces of Mr. and Mrs. Trant, both rather bewildered. . . . Her fingers were moving automatically; before she properly realized she was playing a solo they had stopped. Cloudily she grasped the fact that the "Butterfly" Study had come to an end. Applause floated in, and she found herself walking back to her seat. Applause thinned and subsided; Mrs. Trant said something, and there began the tuning of a couple of violins with much unnecessary prodding of notes on the piano. George was saying something to her, but she was not listening. The door opened and Verreker re-entered. He sat down unostentatiously in a chair close by and his face was hidden by shadows. The piano tinkled into the

opening of a Haydn Concerto. . . . And Catherine thought : " That was really a *horrid* thing to do. I believe it is the nastiest trick I ever saw. I expected rudeness, but somehow not *that*—at any rate, not in public." She was primarily angry, but in her anger there was more than a tinge of disappointment. . . .

She hated him. The fact that it was his teaching that had brought her success was swamped utterly in this petty insult he had seen fit to offer her in public. Once the idea did strike her : perhaps it was just coincidence that he went out while I was playing. But instinct told her that his withdrawal was deliberate, part of a planned scheme to humiliate her. And she kept piercing the shadows where he sat with a venomous greenish glint in her eyes, until she reflected that even if she could not see him, he could very likely see her. At this she flushed hotly and turned away. The evening crept towards midnight. Coffee was handed round. There was a momentary respite from music after the conclusion of the Hadyn Concerto, and conversation swelled into a murmurous hum all over the room. She lit a cigarette and puffed out smoke languidly. George went to the music cabinet and brought out some Ravel music. She scanned it perfunctorily ; as a matter of fact she had but a vague idea of what it was like by looking at it. " Pavane pour un Enfant Défunt," it was called ; the first few pages looked charmingly simple. George could not find " Jeux d'Eaux." Possibly he had not got a copy. But all this modern music was frightfully interesting. Had she heard César Franck's Violin Sonata—the famous one ? Or Scriabin's Eleven Preludes ? Or Debussy's " L'Après-midi d'une Faune " ? Of course, futurist music was merely the development of what other composers had led the way to. Some of Chopin's Ballades and Preludes, for instance, gave one the impression that if he had lived a century later he might have been furiously modern. And of course Tchaikovsky. In fact——

Catherine listened patiently, putting in an occasional " Yes " and " Of course " and " I daresay." Her one thought was : " I have been publicly insulted." And George

did not pass even the frontiers of her mind save when she reflected casually : " Considering what a lot George knows, it's rather queer he should be so remarkably uninteresting at times. . . ."

§ 8

It was nearly one on Christmas morning when the party broke up. Catherine was waiting in the hall for George. He had gone to help somebody to find his or her music-case. Most of the company had gone ; some were going, with much loud chattering on the doorstep and wishing of a " Merry Christmas " ; a few were still in the drawing-room sorting out musical property.

Catherine felt a heavy hand on her shoulder. She turned . . . Verreker ! . . .

In the half-light he looked almost demoniacally ugly. A great fur overcoat hung ponderously to within a few inches of the ground, and his hands were encased in huge fur gloves. Under his arm he carried a rather incongruous cloth cap.

" Excuse me," he began gruffly, " I've got a word to say to you."

She pursed her lips scornfully.

" Be quick, then," she said. " I haven't much time to spare." She was being deliberately rude.

" I suppose you noticed I went out while you were playing ? " he went on.

" Did you ? " As much as to say : " How should I know ? Do you imagine I keep careful watch upon all your movements ? "

" The fact is, I went out because I remember your saying that you never played well if I were present. . . ."

" Did I say that ? " (She was in a deliberately, irritatingly obstructionist mood.)

" . . . So I thought I'd oblige. . . . Afterwards it occurred to me it would be misunderstood. . . . That's all. . . . It wasn't anything else. Of course you're not obliged to believe me."

" Why shouldn't I believe you ? " she said, with no discoverable motive.

" I know of no reason at all," he replied coldly.

Pause.

" And, as it happened, you did play rather well. Distinctly better than usual."

" Did I ? . . . How do you know ? "

" I listened behind the door."

" Did you ? "

She tapped her foot petulantly on the floor. . . . Pause. . . . Then . . .

" All the same, I really don't see quite what you mean." She was merely trying to annoy him. He had come to her humbly, and he was going to be spurned. Yet from the look in his eyes she knew that this last remark had been a mistake. He was not the kind of man who waits to be spurned. . . .

" Oh, well," he said brusquely, " I'm glad I don't need to apologize. . . . Good-night ! "

She called " Good-night ! " so faintly that she was sure he never heard it.

He was gone. . . .

§ 9

Along the Bockley High Street she remarked thoughtfully to George : " I didn't know Verreker patronized your musical evenings."

George replied : " Oh, it wasn't *that* he came for. It was Helen. She persuaded him to play."

Catherine was surprised.

" Helen ? Does Helen know him ? "

" Oh, rather. She translates his books into French."

Again Catherine was surprised. " Books ? I didn't know he wrote books ! On music, I suppose ? "

" No, not on music."

" On what, then ? "

" Economic history."

Once again Catherine was surprised. . . .

" He's a curious chap," George went on. " Economist and musician combined. Queer compound. Helen likes him. She says his music's all the better for having the

brains of an economist put into it, also his economics don't lose anything from being infused with a dash of temperament. Can't say I understand it myself, anyway."

§ 10

And at the corner of Gifford Road he suddenly said : " I suppose our engagement needn't be a particularly long one, need it ? "

She said : " Why ? Do you want to break it off ? "

He laughed, not altogether uproariously.

" No, no. . . . I mean—you know what I mean. Look here, why shouldn't we get married in the New Year ? "

" Married ? " she echoed vaguely. She looked at him as if the very last thing an engaged girl thinks of is of getting married.

" Why not ? " he said, point blank.

" I know of no reason at all," she replied coldly, and was conscious that she was echoing something she had heard before. The stateliness of the phrase fascinated her.

" Then——" he began, and kissed her passionately. But the passion did not thrill her. It was weak and watery compared with the stuff in " Jeau d'Eaux." Besides, she had grown blasé of his kisses. Every night, week after week. . . .

He kissed her again. He fondled her hair. He got hold of heaps of it and crushed it voluptuously in his hand. This was a new experience, and not devoid of interest to her. But even this became stale in a very short time. He kissed her once more.

" Please ! " she said, after some minutes of this sort of thing. " I *must* go. . . . Really I must."

So, with a long, lingering, sentimental caress he left her. And as she climbed the stairs to the attic bedroom that night her one thought was : " Fancy me marrying George Trant ! *Me !* "

The idea at firsy seemed fantastic.

But after a while she accepted it as a more or less logical sequence. And he was undoubtedly in love with her. And she with him ? Oh yes. At least. . . . " Why not ? " she asked herself, and echo within her answered solemnly, " I know of no reason at all. . . ."

CHAPTER XII

DISCONTENT

§ 1

HER first periodic "supervision" by Razounov took place early in the New Year, and once again coincided with an engagement of Razounov to play Chopin at the Bockley Hippodrome.

He puffed serenely at a cigarette while she played the Kreutzer Sonata. At the end he said:

"Nicely, oh yais, quite nicely. . . . And thees ees—let me see—thees ees Mees—Mees——"

"Weston," put in Verreker.

"Ah, yais, . . . plays quite nicely, eh? . . . A leetle more technique, and—more—more—what ees the word? —characterization, eh?"

Verreker nodded.

But Catherine was disappointed. For it was perfectly evident not only that Razounov had failed to recognize her, but that her name when told him had recalled nothing in his mind.

§ 2

At her next lesson with Verreker she said: "Razounov didn't remember me, apparently——"

Verreker replied quite casually: "Oh no, why should he?"

She coloured slightly.

"Well," she said, with some acerbity, "considering he took the trouble to send for me after hearing me play at that club concert, I think he might at least——"

Verreker faced her suddenly.

"What's that?" he said.

"What's *what?*"

"What you've just been talking about. I don't understand in the least. . . . You say he heard you at a concert?"

"Well, I presume so, anyway. What remarkably short memories you musical people have! Razounov apparently heard me at the concert, and sent me a message to come and see him the next day. You ought to remember that: it was you yourself who brought it. You tracked me down to the Forest Hotel."

"Yes, yes. I remember that. . . . But the concert?"

She was becoming more and more sarcastic as his mystification increased.

"Oh yes, the concert. I played Liszt's Concert Etude in A flat (the one you don't like). As I remarked before, presumably Razounov heard me, or else why should he send for me to——"

"I am afraid you have presumed falsely," he interrupted. (She shivered at the stateliness of the phrasing: it reminded her of "I know of no reason at all.") "Razounov could not possibly have heard you play. He never attends local concerts. Besides, he must have been on at the Hippo——"

"Then why did he send for me?" she cried shrilly.

He scratched his chin reflectively. She hated him for that gesture.

"I believe—I think he *did* tell me once. . . . I fancy it was something rather unusual. Somebody—I can't tell you who, because I believe I'm pledged to secrecy—wrote to Razounov offering to pay for a course of lessons for you. His name was to be kept out of it. I mean, the name of the person."

He frowned irritably at the slip of his tongue, and still more at the rash correction which had given prominence to it.

"A man?" she ejaculated.

"I can't tell you that."

"I know it was. Because you said 'his.'"

"Then why did you ask me?"

She swung round on the stool and clasped her hands below her knees. Her eyes were fiercely bright.

" What are Razounov's fees ? " she said quietly.

" Three guineas a lesson."

" And yours ? "

" For purposes of musical instruction I am Razounov. He only supervises. It is a fortunate arrangement, because I am a much better teacher than he."

She looked at him a little amazed. For the first time she caught herself admiring him. She admired the calm, straightforward, unqualified way he had said that he was a much better teacher than Razounov. It was not conceit. She was glad he knew how to appraise himself. She admired him for not being afraid to do so. In her eyes was the message : " So you too have found out that over-modesty is not a virtue ? So have I."

But it was impossible to remark upon it. She plunged into the financial side of the question.

" So somebody has been paying three guineas a week for me ? " (And she thought : " Whoever is it ? ")

" Certainly. You don't imagine Razounov would give lessons for nothing, do you ? "

" That is to say, *you* wouldn't give lessons for nothing, isn't it ? "

" Certainly. I am not a philanthropist. I have other interests besides music. Music is only my way of getting a living. I never even reduce my fees except—except—well——"

" Yes ?—except when ? "

He turned away his head as he replied : " Except in cases where the pupil has no money yet supreme musical genius."

She flared up passionately.

" Look here," she said, " why d'you keep on rubbing it in ? How do you know I shan't be a great pianist ? I say, how do *you* know ? I tell you, I don't believe you. You wait ; you'll see me at the top before long. And then you'll have to eat your words. You're got a good opinion of yourself, haven't you ? Well, so have I. See ? . . .

And I tell you I *will* get to the top! I'll show you you're wrong! See?"

"I hope you will," he said quietly. And added: "I'm glad my criticism doesn't discourage you. It isn't meant to."

To which she was on the point of replying: "But it *has* discouraged me. There have been times when——" She did not say that. There came a pause. Then she reverted to the financial side of the business.

"So somebody's already paid nearly a hundred pounds for me."

"Sixty, I believe. The last quarter has not been paid yet."

(And then the idea came to her immediately—George Trant!)

"Aren't your fees payable in advance?" she asked sharply.

"As a general rule, yes."

"Then why did you make an exception in my case?"

"Because I know the person fairly well, and am confident of being paid soon. That's all."

"Is it?"

"Certainly," he replied brusquely. "If your anonymous benefactor doesn't pay up within the next couple of months the arrangement between you and me will terminate on the first of March. As I said before, I am not a philanthropist."

"Obviously not."

"I hope it is obvious. I have often been mistaken for one."

"Curious! I can scarcely believe it. . . . Have you the address of my anonymous benefactor?"

"I dare say I have it somewhere about. Why?"

"Because I want you to write and tell him something."

"Indeed? And what am I to tell him?"

"Tell him he needn't trouble to pay the last quarter's fees. I will pay them myself."

"I hope you can easily spare the money——"

"Of course I can. I shouldn't offer to pay if I couldn't. I'm not a philanthropist."

" Very well, then. I will write and tell him what you say."

Pause. He was beginning to look rather annoyed.

" And there's just one other thing," she said, putting on her hat ready for departure.

" What's that ? "

" Our arrangement will not terminate on the first of March. I shall continue and pay myself."

" As you wish. . . ." He shrugged his shoulders.

And she thought as she went out : " That was a neat stroke for me. But it's going to be confoundedly expensive. . . ."

§ 3

Henceforward Catherine assumed that George was her anonymous benefactor. His inability to pay the last quarter's fees synchronized with his encounter with the Bishop's Stortford magistrates, resulting in a bill, including costs and all expenses, of nearly twenty-five pounds. Undoubtedly it was George who was financing her. And the question arose : Why ? And the only possible answer was that this quixotic and expensive undertaking was done out of love for her. Catherine did not particularly like it. She was not even vaguely grateful. She almost thought : He had no right to do it without asking me. And if he had asked me I shouldn't have let him. Anyway, it was done behind my back. Treating me like a little child that doesn't know what is best for itself. . . .

At times she became violently angry with him for his absolute silence. Does he intend to carry the secret with him to the grave ? she asked herself. The absurd ease with which he parried any attempts to entangle him in a confession intensely annoyed her. " I don't believe he intends ever to tell me," she thought. " And if I'm ever a well-known pianist he'll congratulate himself in secret by thinking : ' *I* started her. *I* gave her her first chance. She'd have been nothing but for me. *And she doesn't know it !* ' " The thought of George's romantic self-satisfaction at such a juncture oppressed her strangely.

There was also the subtle disappointment of discovering that Razounov had not "found" her as great pianists are supposed to "find" promising talent. But she was becoming accustomed to the shattering of her idealist creations. Besides, she was at this time deriving a good deal of hard satisfaction from her rapid and steady advancement, and no amount of retrospective disillusionment could cast a shadow across the future. Only she was annoyed at the quixotism of George Trant.

One evening she asked him point-blank:

"Did you pay for my first quarter's lessons with Razounov?"

She expected the blow by its very suddenness would tell. He started very slightly.

"Me?" he said, in a tone of bewilderment which, if not genuine, was at least consummate acting. "Me?—I don't understand. What do you——"

"Well, somebody did," she replied curtly, annoyed that her blow had been parried. "And I thought it might be you."

"Good heavens, no!" he said, and at that moment she did not know whether to believe him or not.

§ 4

He had been clever up to then. Afterwards he became too clever. One of those periodic spasms of brilliance overwhelmed him.

The next morning she received a letter, typewritten, plain paper and envelope, with the non-committal postmark: London, W. It ran:

The person who has undertaken the expenses of Miss Weston's musical training wishes it to be understood that he desires to remain anonymous. Should he be questioned on the point by anyone he will feel himself justified in adopting any attitude, even one involving departures from the truth, which seems to him best calculated to preserve the anonymity he so earnestly desires. Hence it is obvious that enquiry, however persistent, can elicit no reliable information.

When Catherine read this she laughed outright. The absurdity, the sublime ridiculousness of the thing tickled

her. She knew now beyond all doubt that it was George Trant. For this note had "George Trant" written all over it. Only he could have devised something so inanely clever and at the same time so incredibly stupid.

The fact of its being posted only three hours after their interview of the evening before was enough to convince her. He must have gone home direct, written it (he had a typewriter at home, she knew), and gone up to London, W., immediately to catch the eleven o'clock post. She pondered on his choice of London, W. Probably he thought a London postmark would be least likely to give a clue. E.C., the most common, would suggest Leadenhall Street, so he chose W. That, probably, was his line of argument.

It was not a bad joke, she agreed. Yet if he acted upon it she could conceive herself getting angry. . . .

§ 5

Her opinion of George went up somewhat after the receipt of this letter. She was immensely struck by its absurdity, yet she had to admit that in addition to being a joke it was quite a clever joke. For several weeks she did not mention the affair, and he too avoided all reference to it. Then she began again to be annoyed at his silence. Besides, she was immensely curious to know what his attitude would be. The full flavour of the joke had yet to be tasted.

An incident—trivial in itself—lowered her opinion of him incalculably.

She had gone for her usual weekly lesson from Verreker. It was springtime, and "Claremont" was being painted, both inside and out. The music-room in which she took her lessons was crowded with furniture from other rooms, and for the first time she saw the evidences of Verreker's labours apart from the world of music. Large bookcases had been dumped anyhow against the walls, and tables littered with papers filled up the usually spacious centre of the room. The piano had been pulled into a corner. She had several minutes to wait, and spent the time perusing the titles on his bookshelves. There was a fairly large collection of modern novels, including most of the works of Wells,

Bennett, Conrad, Hardy, Chesterton and others; complete sets of the works of Shaw and Ibsen, most of the plays of Galsworthy, Granville Barker and Henry Arthur Jones; and some hundreds of miscellaneous French novels. A complete bookcase was occupied by works on economics and economic history—she read the names of Cunningham, Ashley, Maitland, Vinogradoff, Seebohm and Money. Then there was a shelf entirely devoted to Government Blue-Book publications, Reports of Commissions, quarterly and monthly reviews, loose-leaf binders full to bursting with documents, and such like. It was a very impressive array. She was conscious of her own extreme ignorance. Scarcely anything that was here had she read. She was not particularly fond of reading. . . .

On the table near his desk she saw a yellow-backed copy of Ibsen's *Ghosts*. . . .

One result of their frequent bickering was that their conversation had acquired a good deal of familiarity. . . .

" Rather a muddle," he commented, as she was preparing to go after the lesson. He waved a hand comprehensively round the room.

" You've a lot of books," she said.

" Yes; and I read them." (As much as to say: " If you had a lot of books you wouldn't read them." In other words, a purely gratuitous insult. But she ignored it.)

" Reading *Ghosts?* " she remarked, taking up the yellow-backed book from the table.

" Re-reading it," he corrected.

Something erratic and perfectly incomprehensible prompted her next utterance.

" Absolute biological nightmare," she said casually. (It was something she had once heard George say.)

He looked at her queerly.

" Have you read it? "

" No," she said, and blushed. She knew his next question would be, " Then how do you know? " so she added: " I once heard somebody say that about it." She plunged further in sheer desperation. " Don't *you* think it's rather a biological nightmare? " she persisted, with passionate

eagerness, as much as to say: "Please don't make a fool of me. Please let the matter pass this once."

"I confess," he replied coldly, "it never appeared to me in that light. . . . But, of course . . ."

(Truly he was a master of stately phrasing!)

Naturally she regarded it as George's fault primarily. It was clear she had over-estimated George's critical faculties. . . .

§ 6

She was so annoyed with George on the way home that she arrived at the astonishing decision: I will not marry him. . . .

That evening, under the trees of the Bockley High Road, she produced the typewritten anonymous letter and asked him point-blank: "Did you write this?"

"No," he said immediately.

"Did you type it, then?" (It showed her mean opinion of him that she judged him capable of such a quibble.)

"No."

"Do you know its contents?"

"How should I?"

"Then please read it." She handed it to him.

"If you like," he said, and read it. "Well?" he remarked, after doing so.

"How am I to know if you are telling the truth?"

"You have only my word."

"But, according to the letter, you may be telling me a lie."

"That is presuming that I wrote it."

"And you didn't?"

"No."

Pause. Then suddenly she stopped and faced him defiantly.

"I don't believe you!" she snapped.

"Well——"

"Look here. You *did* write this thing. Tell the truth. Own up to it. It's very clever and all that, but it shouldn't be kept up seriously like this. I'm certain you wrote that letter."

"You don't take my word for it?"

"Not in this case."

"In other words, I'm a liar. Eh?"

"I suppose it comes to that."

"Well, you're very polite, I must say. Perhaps you've a few more things you'd like to say about me?"

"Don't try to be sarcastic. But there is one thing if you really want to know."

"What's that?"

She paused, and then hurled it at him with terrible effect.

"I don't love you a bit. . . . Not a tiny bit. . . ."

She saw him whiten. It was thrilling to see how he kept his emotion under control. She almost admired him in that moment.

"Is that so?" he said heavily.

"Yes."

He bit his lip fiercely.

"Then our engagement, I presume, is—is dissolved?"

"Presumably. . . . Here's your ring."

Here occurred a touch of bathos. She tried to get the ring off her finger, but it would not pass the first joint.

"Let me try," he said humbly, and the episode became almost farcical. It came off after a little coaxing. But the dramatic possibilities of the incident had been ruined.

"Well," he said stiffly, "I suppose that's all. It's your doing, not mine. You're breaking up our prospects without the least shadow of reason."

It did seem to her an incredibly wanton thing that she was doing. And at this particular moment, if he had uttered her name slowly and passionately she would have burst into tears and been reconciled to him. But he missed the opportunity.

"I shall return your letters," he continued coldly. (There were not many of them, she reflected.)

"Good-bye," she said.

They shook hands. And she thought: "Fancy having been kissed every night for months and months and suddenly turning to a handshake!" That, more than anything, perhaps, indicated to her the full significance of what had

happened. That and the peculiar sensation of chilliness round her finger where the ring had been.

As she turned into Gifford Road she asked herself seriously the question : " What *has* come over me ? Am I mad ? . . ."

§ 7

More than once during the next few weeks she wished for a reconciliation with George. It was not so much a desire for him as a sense of despair at being once more wholly alone and adrift. Now she was back again where she was when she first came to Gifford Road. With redoubled energy she laboured at her music, and soon the idea of a recital in a London concert hall began to dance attractively in her vision. She extended her reputation by playing in other suburbs ; she thought even of setting up as a private teacher of the pianoforte. With the surplus earnings of a few months she bought an upright piano of decent tone and installed it in the basement sitting-room at Gifford Road.

George wrote to her once, a long letter of mingled pleading and expostulation. He mentioned that he had not yet told his parents what had happened, so that if she desired to change her mind it would be easy to do so. He laid stress on the difficulty he should find in giving Helen and his father and mother an adequate explanation of their separation.

After the receipt of this letter Catherine ceased her vague misgivings. She replied immediately in a letter, short by comparison with his, whose every sentence was the result of careful excogitation :

It is no good thinking of our ever becoming engaged again, because if we did we should soon quarrel. We simply aren't made for one another, and however kind and sympathetic we try to be there'll always be something lacking that sooner or later we shan't be able to do without. . . .

I am bound to confess that the idea of marriage with you always struck me as fantastic and improbable. I never, I believe, considered it seriously. I knew something would happen to put an end to our plans. . . .

. . . Of course I am in the wrong. You have been very kind to me and from the ordinary point of view you would doubtless have made a very good husband. You are quite entitled to consider yourself shabbily treated. I am wholly in the wrong. But I am not going to make myself everlastingly unhappy just to put myself in the right. And whether you would have made me a good husband or not, I should certainly have made you a bad wife. I am a peculiar person, and I would never marry a man just because he would make a good husband. . . . Surely you don't imagine I am going to marry you just to let you out of the difficulty of explaining things at home? . . . A thing like that proves at once the complete misunderstanding that exists between us two. . . . You must tell your parents and Helen exactly what has happened, viz. that I have jilted you. If you were a woman you could claim a few hundred pounds damages for breach of promise. . . . Tell them I have jilted you because I could not bear the thought of marrying you. Blame me entirely: I am heartless and a flirt, cruel, treacherous and anything else you like. Only I am not such a fool as to marry somebody I don't want to marry. . . .

Don't imagine I am in love with somebody else. At present I am not in love with anybody. At one time I thought I was in love with you, but I am doubtful if it ever was so really. I think it was just that you hypnotized me by being in love with me yourself. I mean, I was so interested in your experience. . . .

I don't ask you to forgive me. Because forgiving won't make any difference. I may have done right or I may have done wrong, but I have done what I would do over again if I had to. There is no repentance in me. It is idle to pretend I am sorry. I am extraordinarily glad to have got out of a difficult position. . . .

This letter, by the way, is the first sincere letter I have ever written to you. I do not mean that the others were all insincere: I mean that, compared with this one for truth and sincerity, the others were simply—nothing. . . .

As to my present attitude towards you I will be offensively straightforward. I do not like you. That ought to convince you finally of the uselessness of answering this letter. . . .

§ 8

A cold May day, so chilly that a fire seemed the most welcome thing on earth. Seven in the evening, and it was the last lesson of the quarter. When she reached "Claremont," Verreker was not there. He had been up to the City, and a slight accident outside Liverpool Street Station had delayed the trains. The maid showed her into the music-room and left her alone. She sat in one of the big chairs

by the fire and felt astonishingly miserable. The room had regained its normal condition ; the surplus furniture, the books, papers, writing-desk, etc., had been taken away : but a grandfather clock that had not originally been there now occupied a permanent position in the corner. The embers were burning low, and shadows were darkening all around : the black and white vista of piano keys straggled obscurely in the background ; the clock was ticking sleepily away. Far into the dim distance of the ceiling loomed the polished splendour of the raised sound-board. . . .

Why did she feel miserable ?

It was something in her soul.

She got up and sat down at the piano.

With no discoverable motive she commenced to play the piece that she now knew was Chopin's Black Note Etude (in G flat). It was the one she had heard years ago when she stood in the scented dusk of the Ridgeway in front of the house with the corner bay-window. Since then she had learned it thoroughly and played it many times on concert platforms. But as she played it now it sounded new, or rather, it sounded as if she had heard it only once before, and that was many years ago in the summer twilight. All between was a gap, a void which only the Chopin Etude could bridge. . . .

(In her strange mood she was playing it most abominably, by the way.)

She paused in the middle. Her eyes were like dark gems amidst the red glory of her hair.

" I'm not in love with *any person*," she told herself with incredible calmness. " I'm not in love with anybody in the world. But I'm in love with *Something*. Some Thing ! Very deeply, very passionately, I am. And I don't know what it is. . . . I keep finding it and losing it again. But it's in this "—she started the first few bars of the Chopin piece—" it's all everywhere in that. I knew it was there when I stood and listened to it years ago. Oh, it's there. And I've heard and seen it in other places, too. But as yet it's been only a *thing*. . . . But some day, maybe, I'll tack it on to somebody living, and then . . . God help me ! . . .

Her fingers flew over the keys, and the great octaves began to sing out in the left hand.

"I'll have to be careful," she went on in thought—"careful, or else some day I'll go mad. . . . But it's there, whatever it is. . . . Something that's in that and that's in me as well, and they're nearly tearing me to shreds to get closer to one another. That's how it feels. . . . And I told him I wasn't in love with *anybody*. . . . But *if* I should catch a glimpse of this something in any living being! Nothing should ever keep us apart! Nothing could! Neither life nor death—nor miles—nor anything."

She let her hands fall down the keyboard in a great culminating Niagara of octaves. Two chords like the blare of trumpets, and . . .

The door opened and Verreker entered.

She paused with her hands poised on the keys.

"Well," he began cheerily, "it's the last lesson of the quarter, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said quietly.

He was warming his hands in front of the fire.

"Confoundedly cold for May," he remarked parenthetically. "You've been taking lessons of me for a year now, haven't you?"

"Just over a year."

He stood with his back to the fire.

"Well," he continued, "you've not done badly. In fact, you've—you've improved—er—quite—er—beyond my expectations. I admit that."

It was the biggest compliment he had ever paid her. Pleasure surged in her blood. She flushed.

"And," he went on, "I don't want to go on taking your money when you're no longer likely to benefit much. As a matter of fact, you've come to a point at which my lessons are no longer worth three guineas each to you. You can teach yourself as well as I can teach you. I've led you out to the open sea, and now the time's come for—for dropping the pilot. See?"

She nodded.

" So I don't recommend you to have another quarter with me. I think it would be money wasted."

She nodded.

" Of course I shall be glad to help you in any way I can if you need it."

She nodded.

" And if you ever wish me to give you advice on any point of theory or technique I shall be pleased to do so."

She nodded.

Pause.

" . . . I've just been up to town to get some new music in manuscript from a new author. It's quite good stuff and very modern. I'll run it over if you'd care to hear it."

" Thanks," she said, and vacated the stool. . . .

When he had finished it was almost too dark to see the music. She was standing at the side of the piano with her face in the shadows.

" Play ' Jeux d'Eaux,' " she said softly.

He began. . . .

CHAPTER XIII

LONELINESS

§ 1

She began to be very lonely. She had no friends.

She began to long for companionship. Since her estrangement from George, the Trants' household had of course been barred to her. This meant the loss of Helen's benign, sweetening companionship. There was something in Helen. . . . Catherine missed those Sunday teas at "Highfield." She missed Mrs. Trant's anxious affability, Mr. Trant's bluff hooliganism (which she detested), and Helen's smile, aloof yet full of serene understanding. She missed even those lingering homeward strolls with George, the comfortable feel of his arm linked in hers, and the faint tobacco aroma of his clothes. Undoubtedly she missed his companionship and his passing flashes of brilliance. Once she composed a letter to him. . . .

> We can't be lovers, but why shouldn't we be friends? Surely we're capable of it. I for one am desperately lonely. . . . But understand, there is not the slightest prospect of anything further than friendship developing. . . . But friendship I should be glad to have. . . .

She tore it up as soon as she had read it over. It was no good. He would not understand. . . .

Often in the midst of applause at her concerts she would think the awful thought: I am the loneliest person of you all. You who are envying me have friends and companions. I have none. I am utterly to be pitied.

And sometimes as she strolled along the tree-hung suburban roads the idea of suicide would come before her calmly and without effort. It was one solution of the difficulty. It was

one she did not propose to take. For one thing, life was very precious. And for another, she had not the courage. . . . But suicide always took the position in her mind of a possible and perfectly feasible proposition. She was not hopelessly prejudiced against it. . . .

She would undoubtedly have killed herself but for music. Music gave her courage. She felt that fame as a pianist would compensate for utter unhappiness and loneliness. She had always the feeling: If I am subject to some great trial, if I am miserable and unhappy, I can put my misery and unhappiness into my playing. If my heart is ever on the point of breaking, I shall play Chopin's Nocturnes the better for it. My misery I shall not have to bear alone: the whole world (or a large part of it) will bear it with me. The miseries of other folk are no less intense than mine, but they are suffered in silence and forgotten. Mine will be bequeathed to the world. Even my loneliness will not be so tragic when all the world is sharing it with me. *I* shall suffer, but thousands will throb, not with sympathy, but with an infinitely greater thing—my own agony made real in their hearts. I shall be immortal even if the only thing of me that lasts is what I have suffered. . . .

The craving for immortality in her did not wear a religious aspect. All she desired was to leave behind some ineffaceable indisfigurable thing that she had felt, or that had been a part of her. I am not worth preserving, she told herself. No angel business for me. But my feelings, my sensations, my strange moods and aspects, these are exquisite, different from everything else that has ever existed—divine, imperishable, everlasting. When people have forgotten who I was I shall not mind if they will only remember some solitary fragment of what I have felt. . . .

This was her aim in playing. She projected her personality into the music. Chopin was passionately Chopin when she played him: he was also passionately herself.

But she was tragically lonely.

Her loneliness made her do strange things. One Saturday afternoon in Epping Forest she found a boy fishing with a jam jar in a small pond. He was busy with tadpoles. He

had glorious golden hair and blue eyes, and might have been about twelve or thirteen years old.

"Hullo!" she called. "Caught anything yet?"

He had waded ten or fifteen yards from the bank. He held up a jar.

"Do let me see!" she cried enthusiastically.

He waded back, and they sat down on a grassy bank and examined the contents of the jar. For over half an hour she tried to comprehend his enigmatic Cockney. She hated insects of all kinds, and tadpoles produced in her the same kind of revulsion as did insects. But for half an hour she conquered that revulsion. She held tadpoles in her hand, though her flesh shrank in horror. She was so utterly lonely that this was not too great a price to pay for chatter and companionship.

He was an ordinary gutter-urchin, the kind that runs after the wagonettes touting for halfpennies. His clothes were tattered and not too clean, but she did not mind. She wished she could have talked in his language. She wished he would tell her his secrets. As it was, their conversation was confined to tadpoles, of which subject she was lamentably ignorant.

In a dim, formless way she wished he might sprain his ankle or be taken ill so that she could wait on him and mother him. She wanted some excuse for touching his soft hair and his eyes and his beautiful bare feet.

But when his mates appeared suddenly round the corner of a bush he took up his jar and left her without a word. . . . Still, she was happy and smiling, though her flesh still crept at the thought of tadpoles.

Children were very nice . . . especially boys.

But the maternal instinct was not very strong in her. It was only her loneliness that had intensified what of it that there was.

The thirteenth mazurka of Chopin filled her with strange ecstasy. It was so lonely. . . .

§ 2

She became increasingly conscious of the defects of her education. Literature at the Bockley High School for Girls had meant a painful annual struggle through a play of Shakespeare and a novel of Sir Walter Scott. Catherine did not like either of these authors. The former she regarded secretly as an uninspired country gentleman who had industriously put into blank verse thoughts so obvious that nobody had ever previously deemed them worthy of mention. Such remarks as " Evil and good are mingled in our natures." . . . Her acquaintance with the immortal bard had been confined to that small residue left of his plays when the censoring hand of Miss Forsdyke had excluded (*a*) those plays which are too poor to be worth reading, and (*b*) those which are unsuitable for critical analysis in the Bockley High School for Girls. Of Scott, Catherine's opinion was no higher. She found him woefully dull. And invariably she had to learn his glossaries at the end of the book.

The net result was that Catherine's literary equipment comprised a few score obsolete words and idioms culled in an entirely stupid fashion from *As You Like It, The Merchant of Venice,* and *The Talisman.* Of Lamb, Hazlitt, Landor, Rossetti, the Brontës, De Quincey, Fitzgerald and the modernists she knew nothing. She had been brought up with a vague prejudice that reading anything less than a hundred years old was wasting time. It seemed to her on the face of it quite inconceivable that people should ever equal Scott and Shakespeare. Though she liked neither of them, she was overwhelmed by the mighty concensus of opinion labelling them as the greatest masters (for school use) of the English language. Only rarely did she rebel, and then she thought vaguely : " Supposing all this Scott-and-Shakespeare-worship is a great organized conspiracy ! " . . .

Of French literature she knew nothing. Her study of the French language had not progressed beyond an ability to demand writing implements. (" Bring me pens, ink, writing-paper, a blotter and a stamp. What time does the next

post go? Say: At what hour departs the next post?") That the French language possessed a literature she was but dimly aware. Her ideas of France and the French were derived from various stage Frenchmen she had seen upon the boards of the Bockley Victoria Theatre. France was a nation of dapper little gesticulating men with Imperial beards, and heavily rouged girls who wore skirts a few inches shorter than on this side of the Channel, and said "Cheri?" She was a land of boulevards and open-air cafés, and absinthe and irreligion. Her national industry was adultery.

Partly to occupy her time when she was not practising the piano Catherine joined the Bockley Free Library. She read most of the Victorian poets, and was oppressed by the heavy sentimentality of Tennyson. But she was not really fond of reading; it was only loneliness that drove her to it. Only one of Dickens' novels fascinated her, and that was *Great Expectations*. But for *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* she had a passionate admiration.

Once she discovered a book by Verreker. It was called *Growth of the Village Community*. Obeying a swift impulse, she took it out and went home with it. That evening she wrestled with the first chapter. . . .

Her amazement that anybody could write such a thing was only equalled by her amazement that anybody could read it. It was to Scott in point of heaviness as a hydraulic press is to a pound weight.

It did not precisely raise her opinion of Verreker in the way that might have been expected. It amazed her, but it also made her think: "What's the good of all this useless learning? It makes no difference to him. Nobody would know how clever he is to look at him. And yet he must have been studying these weird problems for years." . . .

She had no sympathy with the remorseless pursuit of knowledge. Her forte was the pursuit of experience.

CHAPTER XIV

HOPE ENTERS

§ 1

ARRIVED at Gifford Road one summer's evening after a dusty journey on top of a crowded motor-bus, Catherine took pen and paper immediately (without taking off her hat) and wrote :

DEAR MR. VERREKER,

I am thinking of giving a pianoforte recital in one of the London concert halls. I should be very grateful for your advice and assistance in the matter. Will you do this for me ?

Yours sincerely,

CATHERINE WESTON.

When Catherine had set out some hours before she had had no thoughts of a pianoforte recital. To be sure, the idea was always revolving more or less nebulously in her line of vision, but till this moment it had lacked definition. A pianoforte recital involved a good deal of risk. It meant hours and hours of preparatory practice, much worry and anxiety, and the possible loss of a good deal of money. It meant running the gauntlet of all the blasé and supercilious musical critics. It meant learning some good solid " background " piece of work to placate the British public—something heavy and hackneyed and academic—a Brahms sonata or some Beethoven pomposity. And to consult Verreker on the matter was merely to invite showers of disappointment and disillusionment. He would assuredly recommend her not to attempt a recital. He would tell her candidly that her abilities were not equal to it. And if she insisted, he would tell her to go somewhere else for advice : he would not risk his reputation by backing her. He would be violently rude

and outspoken. He would repeat his dictum that she could never advance beyond the front rank of the second-raters. . . .

She knew all these things. She had thought of them, weighed them up, and counted them nothing. She was impulsive, but she knew whither her impulse led and what it involved. She knew that Verreker would insult her. . . . And yet she wrote to him.

As she ran joyously down Gifford Road to post the letter she thought: "What will he think of my note? What will he think of the wording of it? How will the concluding sentence affect him?—'Will you do this for me?'—So charming, so delightfully personal, so intimate, with a dash of roguish coquetry! But will he see all that?—or will he think it merely impudent?"

Anyway, she decided, I should get an answer by Wednesday morning. . . .

§ 2

She worked it out mathematically. He would receive the note by the first post on Tuesday morning. If he wrote immediately it was just possible that a reply might reach her by the seven o'clock post on Tuesday evening. However, such promptness was unlikely and not to be expected; it was much more probable that he would write later on in the day, so that she should receive his answer by breakfast time on Wednesday. She pinned her hopes to breakfast time on Wednesday. Yet she could not help a feeling of tense anticipation when the postman knocked at the door on Tuesday evening. He has been prompt, she told herself triumphantly, and she sat down at the piano and started to turn over the pages of a Bach Concerto. She would not betray her excitement by rushing down into the kitchen to fetch the letter. She would let Mrs. Carbass bring it up to her. After all, it was absurd to be so concerned about a letter. And a few minutes made no difference in any case.

But Mrs. Carbass did not come. And the awful strangling thought came to Catherine: "Perhaps there wasn't a letter for me!" At least, it was awful and strangling at first, until she told herself somewhat irritably: "Well, you didn't

expect one, did you ? Give the man time ! " And of course there was Bank Holiday traffic : possibly that accounted for some delay. Curious that she should have neglected that superbly facile explanation—of course, it *must* be Bank Holiday traffic. . . .

Or perhaps Mrs. Carbass had forgotten to bring it up. Catherine discovered a sudden desire to borrow Mrs. Carbass's scissors. She went down the short flight of steps into the dark kitchen.

" Can I have your scissors a moment, Mrs. Carbass ? "

" Certainly, miss. . . . Leave 'em up there w'en you ve finished with 'em an' I'll take 'em w'en I brings the supper. . . ." She took the scissors off the hook and handed them to Catherine.

" By the way," said Catherine at the door, " post been yet ? "

" Yes, miss. Nothink for you. Only a Hodson's dripery circular—they're always sendin' 'em round."

" Thanks ! " replied Catherine nonchalantly, and went back to her sitting-room.

" Of course," she told herself, regarding the scissors vacantly, " it's almost impossible for him to have replied in time to reach me this evening. What with the Bank Holiday traffic and one thing and another. . . ."

She pinned her hopes to Wednesday morning. . . .

§ 3

On Wednesday morning she came downstairs early. The post came usually at seven-fifteen, and letters were as a rule by her plate when she came to breakfast at eight. Never before had the prospect of reading letters enticed her from bed before seven-forty-five. But this morning was beautiful and sunny, and she thought (as she lay in bed about a quarter past seven) : " It is shameful to lie in bed on such a morning as this ! I've a good mind to get up and have a stroll up the High Road before breakfast."

She dressed and came downstairs to the basement sitting-room. As she turned the handle of the door her heart beat

fast and she thought : " Another five seconds and I shall know ! Another five seconds and——"

There was something by her plate ! Only it was rather too bulky to be a private letter. But there was probably a letter hidden underneath it. She approached quickly and snatched it up. . . . Nothing !

The bulky package was a copy of a book of words for a forthcoming concert at which she was to play.

As she went out into Gifford Road the early pilgrims to the City were already converging into the stream that flowed along the High Road towards Upton Rising Station. It was, as she had before noticed, a beautiful morning. Passing the pillar-box, she was struck by the appalling possibilities of a letter being lost in the post. It had to be taken from the pillar-box into a bag, carried to the central post-office, sorted, put into another bag, and finally inserted in the letter-box of just one out of the ten thousand houses of Upton Rising ! At a dozen crises in its chequered course it might stray, get lost, or be waylaid. The arrival of it was a miracle ! That a few words scribbled on an envelope should guide a slip of paper through all the maze and tangle of civilization, finally selecting one out of a possible million spots for its delivery, was nothing less than a stupendous miracle ! . . . Strange that it had never occurred to her before. On the pillar-box plate she read : " Letters containing coin etc. should not be posted in this box, but should be registered." That, of course, was a safeguard against theft. There were always letter thieves about. It was a lucrative business. They opened letters at random hoping to find postal orders inside. No doubt letters were often lost in this way. . . .

But, of course, he had scarcely had time to reply yet. Perhaps he was consulting Razounov. Perhaps he was not in Upton Rising, and his letters had to be forwarded on to him. Or perhaps he had written and delayed to post the letter. Or perhaps the Bank Holiday traffic. . . .

She pinned her faith to the midday delivery. . . .

§ 4

Wednesday passed, and no letter came And then Thursday. Catherine had never before been so eager about a letter. She took to going out for a stroll about post-time so that if the letter should arrive it would be there waiting for her when she returned. This manœuvre seemed somehow to lessen the tension of waiting. . . . Friday came and went, and still no reply from Verreker. Sometimes Catherine felt passionately and proudly annoyed, sometimes she would be on the point of writing again to him. Sometimes she thought: "It is my fault: the letter has irritated him; he has disliked that concluding sentence, 'Will you do this for me?'" And sometimes she felt: I have written him a polite note, and it is his place to reply. If he doesn't, I shan't write again.

And then she had intervals of amazing lucidity, when she upbraided herself without stint. You are being as trivial and as paltry over this letter as anybody might be, she accused herself—your behaviour is absolutely absurd. There are a hundred reasons why he may not have replied, and one of them is that he has completely forgotten. After all, you do not occupy such an important place in his mind as to make it impossible for him to forget you. . . .

And then on Saturday morning (she deliberately stayed in bed till eight in order to convince herself that she had ceased to be absurd) the familiar handwriting lay uppermost beside her plate. With carefully restrained eagerness she cut open the envelope with the bread-knife.

DEAR MISS WESTON (*she read*),

I am sorry I have delayed in replying to your note, but I have been extremely busy and that must be my excuse. With regard to your project, it is almost impossible to discuss it in correspondence, so will you come to tea here on Sunday (4 p.m.)?

Yours sincerely,
R. E. VERREKER.

"H'm!" she thought. "So he was busy. That was what kept him from writing." She had never thought of that. And he wanted her to come to tea on Sunday. Sunday was to-morrow. . . .

Her first feeling was one of unutterable relief that the terrible melancholy of Sunday afternoon would be staved off for one week. . . . Then she began to speculate what she should wear on the occasion. . . . And afterwards as she strolled along the clean white asphalt of the High Road she yielded herself wholly to vague rapture. . . .

§ 5

Sunday was very hot. It was the kind of day which normally would have made her acutely depressed. The air was windless and sultry, the streets dusty and paper-littered, the sky blazingly and mercilessly blue. As Catherine walked briskly down Gifford Road she passed the whelk-seller pushing his briny-flavoured handcart along the gutter. Further down the road the Sabbath carnival of the suburbs had already begun: a downstairs window was wide open at the bottom, and from within came the throaty gargling strains of a gramophone. At another house a piano was vamping to an antiquated music-hall ditty. The tar in the roadway was sweating in great oozing blots, and the wheels of the whelk cart had left conspicuous ruts in the soft tar-macadam near the kerb.

In the High Road (running north and south) there was no shade save from occasional trees that overhung the sidewalks. Trams and motor-buses fluttered by bearing crowds of white-frocked girls and men in sedate browns and greys Forestwards. Now and then a wagonette rumbled over the wooden blocks of the roadway, tastelessly beflagged and beribboned, crammed to overflowing with miscellaneous juvenility, all shouting and singing and waving paper streamers. Sometimes a middle-aged or elderly group passed in similar vehicles, and the noise and clamour of these was of the maudlin type. As each party drew up to the King's Arms there was a frenzy of horn-blowing and a quick descent for refreshment.

Catherine passed along the hot pavements with light step and light heart. She passed through the crowded, gesticulating throng outside the King's Arms, where the marble ledges were crowded with empty, froth-smeared beer glasses,

and the diminutive shrubs in green-painted barrels were yellow and parched for lack of water. Normally these things would have struck her as tawdry and dismal, but to-day she took no notice of them. She was not even conscious of the terribly melancholy aspect of whole rows of shuttered shops with doors blistering in the heat.

But in the Ridgeway all was strong light and deep shadow. The asphalt roadway gleamed dazzlingly white under the sun, and the sidewalks, overhung with heavy lime-trees, were avenues of green twilight. Along them men's sunburnt faces seemed strangely brown and handsome, and the sweat that disfigured the noses and foreheads of girls no longer glistened. Even a hawker bearing with an easy hand a monstrous cloud of multicoloured balloons for sale on the High Road seemed rather to lend a grotesque charm than a positive disfigurement. And the houses, well set back from the road, displayed their gilded domes and sham minarets and pseudo-Elizabethan gables with quiet, unostentatious pride. Nicknamed "The Lovers' Parade," the Ridgeway was justifying the title. But in the soft gloom there was only enchantment in the passing of couples: their facial blemishes were toned down, their gestures took on a strange and subtle grace, their wandering was shadow-like amongst the shadows. Only when they stepped off the kerb into the garish sunlight was the spell shattered, the dream brought to an awakening.

Catherine passed airily along. Just as she had not been conscious of the brutal garishness of the High Road, so now the soft charm of the Ridgeway did not affect her. Her heart was abundantly glad and joyous, but her senses were quiescent. Had she been in her usual mood of lonely introspection she would have thrilled at the beauty of all around her—faces would have attracted and repelled her with fierce intensity, she would have laughed at the cloud of colour towed by the balloon man, she would have drunk in the cloying scent of geraniums like nectar. As it was, she was vaguely but tremendously rapturous. And the rapture came from within her, not from without.

§ 6

She found him in the garden seated in a deck-chair (adjusted to the bottom notch) reading the *Observer*. He wore grey flannel trousers and a sort of Donegal tweed sporting jacket. He was utterly divorced from the prevailing atmosphere of Upton Rising in that his attire betrayed no indication of the fact that it was Sunday. Catherine thought: "How delightfully Bohemian!" and (an afterthought), "He certainly hasn't dressed up for me, anyway."

"Hullo!" he cried, as she obtruded herself into the alcove of shrubbery which ringed him round almost completely. And he rose (a matter of obvious difficulty) and shook hands with her. He dropped the *Observer* on the lawn. Also he smiled at her: it was not a beautiful smile, because he could not smile beautifully, but it was a smile of welcome.

"Come along, and we'll find another chair," he said. They strolled over the lawn and towards the house.

"I'm taking a day off," he said briskly, "and I think I deserve it. The first day off I've had for months."

"Except last Monday," she put in.

"Why—what happened then?"

"You were at High Beech. I saw you."

"Oh, Bank Holiday, you mean? Oh, that wasn't pleasure exactly. Miss Trant and I had gone to Hertfordshire to collect some data in connection with a new book I'm on with. Coming back we thought we'd go past High Beech—that was all."

"Another book?"

"Only a treatise on economics—not at all interesting to most people, I assure you. You'd probably find it extremely tiresome."

"How do you know?" she asked aggressively. She disliked his readiness to lump her among the "most people." Also she was annoyed to think that what he said was probably true, that she would find it extremely tiresome. She had tackled his *Village Community* (the first chapter) and been unable to make head or tail of it.

"I don't know," he replied. "I only think . . . Mrs. Tebbutt!"

The summons was presumably to someone in the house. A female voice called "Yes!"

"Bring some tea outside, will you?" he sang out, and the voice within responded with a resigned, "Very well, sir." . . . Into an outhouse he plunged, and emerged with a deck-chair and cushions.

"Come on," he said, and handed her the cushions to carry. "It's pretty cool round by those shrubs."

They strolled back over the lawn, and took up positions facing one another.

"Mind if I smoke?" he remarked, and before she could murmur a "Oh, not at all," he had lit a cigarette and was puffing at it.

"Smoke yourself?" he then said.

"Thanks," she replied, and took one out of a box of Egyptian cigarettes that lay on the ground beside him.

"Now," he began, "about that recital. . . ."

"Yes?"

"Let me talk to you a bit. . . . Do you know anything about recitals? No, of course you don't. Well, listen to me. . . . A recital . . ."

§ 7

What he told her might be summarized thus:

"A recital is an expensive business. It means taking a risk. If it is a failure it is a big failure. If it is a success it opens up a vista of bigger successes. It is the barrier which every first-class *virtuoso* has to approach and surmount. There is no reason why you should not attempt to surmount it. Provided you are willing to undertake the financial risk. After all, though you will never be a first-class pianist, you may quite easily be a second, and a good many second-class people pass the barrier successfully."

As a sort of running undercurrent to his remarks there was the implication:

"There is no knowing what the British public may do. I prophesy neither success nor failure. Even if you aren't

tip-top the public may insist on treating you as if you were, in which case you will no doubt have a difficulty in believing anybody who tells you you aren't. If the fickle public makes an idol of you, I can't help it. I can only assure you you don't merit it. In fact, I wash my hands of all responsibility for your future."

Practically what he said was :

"I will help you as far as I can. I will arrange your recital,'get you a hall, have tickets, programmes and announcements printed, and secure you a tolerable press. All this I will do without in the least guaranteeing that your enterprise will be anything but a howling fiasco."

She had expected so little that she was grateful even for this. She had prepared herself to receive merciless rebuffs. What she had not prepared herself to do was to express gratitude. Consequently she found a difficulty in doing so. But no annoyance was discernible in him. He did not appear to want her thanks or even to notice the absence of them. And this in some inexplicable sense piqued her. She would have liked him to say: "Aren't you grateful?" (Though, of course, it was just the last thing he would ever say.) But at least he might have waited enquiringly for her to voice her gratitude. And if he had, she would probably not have done so. But because he ran on talking of all kinds of irrelevant things she was both quaintly annoyed and intensely desirous of thanking him.

Suddenly she realized he was paying her the stupendous compliment of talking to her about himself.

"Of course I love music," he was saying, "but I do not let it occupy my whole life. There are bigger things. Infinitely bigger things. . . ."

She was pleased he had used the word "love" so straightforwardly, so naturally, so unhysterically. She was glad he had not said "am fond of," or "am awfully keen on," or "like very much." Most men were afraid of the word ; she was glad he was not. And immediately she thought : "If I had said it, it would have sounded schoolgirlish. What is it that gives dignity to what he says ? "

"What are they ?" she asked.

"The biggest and most important thing in the world," he replied, "is life. Life *is* worth living, there's not a doubt about that. But it's more worth living for some people than for others. And the things that make or tend to make those differences are among those infinitely bigger things of which I spoke."

She did not properly understand what he meant, but she was striving magnificently to seem as if she did. And the more she strove the more she felt: There are parts of this man that I shall never understand. And I am defenceless, I am at a terrible disadvantage, because there are no parts of me that he could not understand if he would. . . . And all the time during the conversation she had been noticing little insignificant things which gave her a peculiar, almost a poignant pleasure. His appearance was anything but effeminate, yet the whole pose of him as he poured out tea was instinct with an almost womanly grace. All his movements (excepting those that involved the rising out of his deck-chair) were so free, so unfettered, so effortless, even when they were uncouth. This does not mean that his table manners were perfect. They were not. Some of them were extremely original. He ate small triangular ham sandwiches at two mouthfuls. He dropped cigarette ash into his saucer. His cake dissection was ungeometrical. And yet he was all the while doing two things at once with such a superb and easy-going facility —talking and having tea. She admired him. She passionately admired him. She passionately admired him because everything she admired him for was done so unconsciously, so effortlessly, so unthinkingly. She watched the movements of his face as he spoke, and admired the splendid lack of symmetry that was there. She was fascinated by the appalling ugliness of some of his facial expressions. And she was fascinated by his supreme neglect of whether they were ugly or not. She shrank back at some of his facial eccentricities; she wanted to cry out: "Don't do that again—ever! It looks terrible! It spoils you. You don't show yourself to advantage a bit!" And the next minute she was admiring the nonchalance that made him so splendidly indifferent to the impressions he gave. The very hideousness of him at

times was the measure of his individuality and of her admiration.

§ 8

It was eight o'clock when she left "Claremont." In the Ridgeway the long green avenue seemed scarcely darker than before, though twilight was falling and the rising moon flooded the roadway in pale radiance. Everything reminded her of those old evening walks from the Bockley High School back home to No. 24, Kitchener Road. Groups of girls swept past her like fleecy clouds, with here and there the swift sparkle of an eye or the sudden flash of an ornament caught in the jets of moonlight that fell through the lacery of leaves. She was very happy. All the poetry in the world was greeting her. And the Ridgeway, so sleek, so dapper, so overwhelmingly suburbanized, seemed to her full of wonderful romance. Nothing was there in that soft light that did not seem passionately beautiful. Someone was clipping a hedge close by, and the gentle flip-flip of the shears was golden music to her. The rich scent of the cut evergreen was like nectar. From an open window came the chatter of children's voices and the muffled hum of a gramophone, and she suddenly awoke to the realization of how wonderful a thing a gramophone can be. The long vistas of concrete pavement with their alternating cracks making two lines of tapering perspective were to her among the most beautiful visions she had ever seen. And out in the High Road—the common, condemned, despised High Road—all was poetry and romance. Trams passed like golden meteors flying through space ; the last rays of the evening sun had picked out a certain upstairs window in the King's Head and turned it into a crimson star. The King's Head was no longer a public-house ; it was a lighthouse, a beacon flashing hope and welcome on the long pale road whither the blue tram-lines sped to infinity. And over the roofs the moon was splashing in streams of silver foam. Bockley, that great, straggling, drab, modern metropolitan suburb was no longer itself, but a city gleaming with strange magic.

She did not go straight home, but wandered amongst the

stream of strollers along the High Road towards the Forest. She was amazed at the astonishing loveliness of this place, where she had been born and had lived and worked and dreamed. She was thrilled at the passionate beauty that was exuding from every house and building like some rare essence. She had always taken it for granted : Bockley is an ugly place. And now it seemed that Bockley was transfigured into a thing of wild, tumultuous beauty, as if the flesh had fallen away and revealed a soul of serene wonderment. Bockley ! The very word became subtle and mysterious, like a password or the sacred formula that frees the powers of magic !

She was in a mood of childish impressionableness. When she reached High Wood she found the great green arena round the tram terminus dotted with couples. . . . She was not in the mood to call anything vulgar. She was amazed at the things she had missed. She remembered countless evenings at the Victoria Theatre when she had heard comedians make cheap witticisms about love and the twilight. . . . And now, sauntering about the fringe of the Forest, she glanced hastily at each couple as she passed them and asked herself : " Is this love ? "

Even in the noisy procession of youths and maidens arm-in-arm and singing music-hall ditties, she could not discern vulgarity. And the scampering of brown-legged and bare-footed urchins over the dark turf was nothing but pure poetry. Life—life, she echoed in her mind, and did not quite know why she did so. . . . And a single glance down the long High Road, where the swirling trams glittered like a chain of gems, made her wish to cry with the very ecstasy of being alive. . . .

CHAPTER XV

SUCCESS

§ 1

A STRANGE thing had happened. Something unbelievable, something half-expected yet absolutely incredible when it happened. She had scored a brilliant success. . . .

In the small room behind the concert hall the applause was still echoing in her ears. She looked proudly in the mirror and she saw herself flushed and triumphant. She knew instinctively that she had been hugely successful. She knew that she had exceeded her own expectations. Something had gripped her and carried her magnificently forward. And even the critics had smiled dourly upon her.

A press association man had requested an interview. . . . A photographer's agency had asked for permission to photograph her. . . . And her vanity suggested: The next visitor ought to be from a gramophone company asking to record my playing. . . . But this proved premature. . . .

She stood in front of the mirror and told herself in mad ecstasy: It's done! You've done it! You've passed the barrier! Henceforward no more worries—no more fits of disappointment—no more dashed hopes—no more thwarted ambitions! This breaks up all pessimism. Whatever fit of despondency you fall into the remembrance of to-day will lift you out of it. You have in this an unfailing antidote for depression. . . . Taste this moment to the full—it will never grow stale, but it will not always be so fragrant as now. Drink in the ecstasy of success! . . . The tears welled up in her eyes as she yielded to the enchantment of realization.

She looked at her hands. Strange, weirdly fascinating things—that could achieve what they had achieved! Wonderful fingers that could lift her so magically on to the pinnacles of fame!

Verreker entered. During the performance he had occupied an inconspicuous seat about the middle of the hall. He was dressed professionally—that is, in a dark lounge suit which threw into prominence his barbaric cast of countenance.

"Well," he began, "I suppose I ought to congratulate you——"

She gave him an extraordinary glance of mingled triumph and defiance.

"You *ought*," she said, "but you're not going to, are you?"

He smiled grimly. "On the contrary," he replied, "I will compliment you so far as to say that your playing was extraordinarily good."

Like an impulsive child she seized hold of his coat sleeve.

"Say it again!" she cried ecstatically. "Oh, *do* say it again! That's the biggest compliment you've ever paid me, and I do love being praised! Say it again!" She was looking up into his face with delirium in her eyes. Also she was trembling, and her hot fingers tightened over his wrist.

"Don't get excited," he replied reprovingly. "And don't imagine you're famous all at once. You didn't play the Mozart very brilliantly."

She laughed hysterically.

"I don't care what you say about that! You're trying to unsay that compliment and you can't! I don't care whether you say it again or not—you've said it once. And I shall remember!"

"You shouldn't live for compliments."

"I don't. But I should die without them."

"You're much too excited. Calm down."

"I can't. . . . Oh, I can't. . . . I feel I shall never be calm again."

"Well, get home as quietly as you can, anyway. I'm not going back to Upton Rising to-night or I'd take you. . . . Don't think too much of yourself . . . Good-bye!"

He went abruptly from the room.

She gazed after him and then again at herself in the mirror. A man appeared at the door and asked if she wanted a cab.

"Oh yes—a taxi," she said, and was thrilled at the polygon significance of what had happened. Now she was suddenly

translated to that social sphere in which taxis are habitually employed. . . .

§ 2

She realized something of her indebtedness to Verreker when the following day she received a sheaf of interesting literature from a press-cutting agency. Nearly all the press notices were distinctly favourable, and some were well on the way to being fulsome. She experienced the rich delight of reading pleasant things about herself. And she felt: This is Fame!

When she went out into the streets she experienced all the subtle joys of a prince travelling incognito. She felt: If people knew who I was I should be stared at. She was conscious of the disadvantage of being always stared at, yet she was proud to think of herself as something more than what she seemed. She was conscious of the subtle democracy of her travelling on a London County Council tram-car. She thought: I, sitting amongst you all, so ordinary, so commonplace, so seemingly like yourselves, am really stupendously, immeasurably different! You might talk with me, walk with me, know me for years and years and never discover that difference. But put me in front of a grand piano and I will show you that difference in thirty seconds! . . .

She began to regard her physical attractions dispassionately. She knew she was not good looking, nor even pretty, but hitherto she had shirked the recognition of the fact. Now she became almost impulsively eager to admit the width of the barrier that separated the peculiarities of her features from the ideal of feminine beauty. She had often regarded herself critically in the mirror and asked herself the question: What do I look like? She tried to think of her reflection as of a casual stranger seen in the street: on this basis she attempted to assess its qualities, good and bad. But concerning the whole, as opposed to the component parts, she had hitherto shirked a decision. She would not commit herself so far as to say whether it was good or bad, attractive or otherwise. But now she cheerfully agreed: I am not at all pretty and my red hair is only nice to those who like red

hair. But I am distinctive. If you looked at me once you would probably look at me again. My face is not one you would easily forget. These remarks are ambiguous, I know, but they are none the less true for that. And a subconscious implication was: It adds to the extraordinary interestingness of myself that I am not conventionally good looking. Call me grotesque or what you will, but remember that my looks are no more astonishing than myself. . . . Viewing herself thus, she was rather proud of her facial eccentricities. And she was conscious that, good looking or not, there was a subtle attractiveness about her. She decided, quite without any evidence in support of the theory: The attractiveness of a person who is not good looking (if it exists) is an immensely richer, rarer, and more precious commodity than that possessed by one who is merely conventionally beautiful. . . .

While being frankly and (she thought) rather charmingly conceited, she was stringently careful to avoid the taint of snobbishness. The thought occurred to her more than once that the very insistence of her efforts to eschew snobbishness might be even in itself a subtle manifestation of the dreaded evil. She was urgently careful to show Mrs. Carbass that her rise to success had made no difference at all in her relations with her. She enjoyed emphasizing the contrast between their two stations, and she enjoyed equally emphasizing the paradox of her behaving as if they were on equal terms together. She was glad for her to see her casually in expensive evening gowns, she enjoyed the thrill of having taxis waiting for her in the street; she liked Mrs. Carbass to bring her in a handful of letters and say: "All fer you, miss. You gits all the letters nardays." These things indicated the gulf that was widening between their respective social positions. And she also liked to clean her own boots on a Sunday morning (when Mrs. Carbass stayed late in bed), and she enjoyed the mediocre thrills of travelling third-class. For these things indicated the amazing paradox that though she had achieved fame, fame had not changed her. Whereas fame *had* changed her: it had made her more arrogant, more self-confident, more conceited.

As she cleaned her boots on the Sabbath she felt a delicious thrill at the thought: These fingers of mine, so deft, so delicate, fingers in a million, are now employed in the most ordinary, unromantic and menial of tasks. For the moment I am no better than a maid-of-all-work. But what amazing secrets these fingers of mine possess! And what a grand paradox it is! That these fingers, such incomparable exponents of Chopin and Liszt and Beethoven, should be prostituting themselves for the purpose of producing a black gloss on a pair of shoes!

And somewhere at the back of her mind was the thought: It adds to the extraordinariness of myself that I do these things. . . .

§ 3

Once in company with Verreker she went to see Razounov at a flat in Piccadilly. Razounov's memory played him more than usually false. Verreker sent up his card, but it was plain to any beholder that Razounov had not the slightest recollection either of the name or, when he saw him, of the man.

"Ah, Mister Verrekair," he stammered vacantly, and looked at Catherine. "And Mrs. Verrekair, eh?" he continued, leering at her babyishly.

"No," said Catherine, and expected herself to blush, and was surprised when she didn't.

"Zen zhe future Mrs. Verrekair, eh?" insisted Razounov, with dreamy cunning.

"No," said Verreker, with what Catherine thought was unnecessary enthusiasm. "This is my former pupil Miss Weston—I expect you have heard of her."

"I haf rhead of her," corrected Razounov. "I deed not know that she wass a pupil of yours. I am very pleased to make her acquaintenance." He bowed ceremoniously, quite unconscious that he had met her twice before.

The conversation languished. Razounov forgot so many things that it was impossible to rely upon reminiscence for small talk. And Catherine, who had hitherto been decidedly sceptical about the genuineness of his eccentricities, came

to the definite conclusion that they were involuntary, and not manufactured to captivate music-hall audiences. He was at once a genius and a baby. It was absurd to stay there long, so after ten minutes or so of artificially sustained conversation they took their leave, and descended into the electric radiance of the streets. Verreker seemed rather amused than annoyed at the reception Razounov had given them.

"You see now," he said, "why it is impossible for Razounov to give pianoforte lessons in person. For one thing, he wouldn't remember who his pupils were. . . ."

It was while they were passing the shuttered frontage of Swan and Edgar's that an amazing conversation sprang up.

"Razounov made some queer mistakes about me, didn't he?" she said provocatively.

"Yes," he replied laconically.

It was plain that the topic would languish if she did not pursue it further. So she resumed, with an audacity which startled no one more than herself.

"Would you mind if he had been right?"

The daring of the question nearly took her breath away when she had spoken it. But at the moment her mind was infected with daring. She looked at him boldly as much as to say: You heard right, I *did* say that. I'll say it again if you didn't hear. And there was in the poise of her head an enigmatic coquetry which declared: I may be serious or I may not. I shan't tell you which. . . .

He looked at her almost contemptuously. Or perhaps it was the changing lights of the shop windows that flung his face into unaccustomed silhouette.

"I'm not very particular," he said nonchalantly.

She suddenly took up the air of one who has been contemptuously affronted. (Whether it was real or just an absurd make-believe she herself could not have told.)

"Well," she replied sharply, "I'm sure I shan't marry anybody who doesn't want me to."

"I should think not," he said heavily, and once more the conversation seemed likely to die a natural death. She was so startled at the utter audacity of what she had said that

she could not think of anything to revivify it. Strangely enough, it was he this time who gave it an exciting, if not a long lease of new life.

"Of course," he remarked speculatively, as if it were just occurring to him while he said it, "that remark of yours was really quite irrelevant. Logically, I mean. It had nothing to do with what I said."

"What did you say, then?"

"I merely said that I was not very particular."

"And what does that mean?"

"It means—itself. That's all. . . ." He paused and added: "And supposing I were to marry you, it would prove it."

"Prove what?"

"That I am not particular."

Here the amazing conversation ceased, partly maybe because it had achieved a certain degree of finality, certainly in part because this crisis in it synchronized with their entrance into the tightly packed tube lift at Piccadilly Circus Station. The journey home to Upton Rising did not favour its resumption. Catherine was amazed at her own intrepidity, astonished and angry in almost equal proportions at her absurd daring. And she was also trying to grasp the significance of what he had said. In the end she decided: It was a rather silly joke, and his replies were about as silly as my questions.

The first-class compartment from Liverpool Street was empty save for the two of them. But the train stopped at all stations, and any intimate conversation was liable to sudden interruption. Catherine also was too chaotically minded to attempt to ruffle the finality with which the previous conversation had closed. She was content to chatter occasionally on trivial subjects and indulge in long intervals of uneloquent silence.

It was nearly ten o'clock in an evening late in September, and the train passing from the urban to the suburban districts seemed to gather with it the rich cloying scent of autumn. It was quite warm, though the breeze that blew in occasionally from the open window was of a delightfully perfumed coolness. Far back whence they had come the

myriad lights of London reflected a warm glow in the sky, and ahead over the broad belt of heath and woodland the sky was pale with a million stars. Station after station slunk into view and passed unostentatiously away ; great sprawling vistas of suburb unfolded themselves with all the soft witchery of lamp-strewn residential roads ; here and there the train swung over bridges and past terraces of winedark back gardens ; the great suburban highways were swollen rivers of light. Suburb after suburb slipped by, like episodes in a crowded dream, suburbs that Catherine had never visited, or had only vaguely heard of, places as foreign and unrecognizable as Paris or Yokohama. And each one seemed weighed heavy with romance as the night sank upon it ; each one seemed strangely, passionately beautiful. Ever and anon the train would glide effortlessly to a standstill at some half-deserted station with lamps that creaked in the breeze like the tuning of a hundred violins. And then off again into the scented twilight until Catherine, enchanted by the beauty of night, was too spellbound to read the names on the stations, and so lost count of where she was.

And then the suburbs lost coherence and straggled vaguely into the countryside ; clusters of light shone out from houses wreathed in trees ; a chain of golden trams marked the course of a distant high road. And after a short respite of woods and meadows Bockley came cleanly into view—beautiful, poetic Bockley, with the High Road wreathed in a halo of soft, reddish light. The train rose high till it seemed to be passing on the very roofs of the town : window lights went winking by and with sweeping dignity the station curved into view. A breath-taking pause and the train was off again, and the panorama rose till it was nothing but a cliff of glowing windows ; trees and turf embankments loomed hugely in the foreground ; the speed was gathering, the hum of wheels was swelling to a roar. Like a clap of thunder a tunnel engulfed everything. And Catherine leaned back amongst the cushions as one in whom tension has suddenly been snapped.

At one portion of the tunnel men were working on the line, and as the train shot by the lurid yellow light of naphtha-

flares flooded the compartment like a swift tide. And at that moment Catherine glanced at Verreker. His face was strong and stern in the flame silhouette ; his eyes were closed. His profile was ruggedly, barbarically masculine. There were no soft curves, only angles of terrifying strength. And as she looked at him in that fraction of a second, when the yellow brilliance from the naphtha-flares was at its height, she felt a sudden impulse surge up within her. A strange emotion, entirely new in her experience, seized her and overwhelmed her. In one swift moment of vision she saw herself in shadowless panorama. Mists swam before her eyes, but they were mists in which she could view herself in cruel clearness. The light of the naphtha-flares seemed to penetrate her soul and illumine its darkest difficulties. And then, as quickly as her mind took to flash the vision to her brain, she knew. The revelation stood before her in horrible, terror-striking apparency. . . .

She loved this man. The realization came upon her with a thrill of swift, palpitating horror. She knew now the explanation of a thousand tiny mysteries that had been lately puzzling her. She saw the awful consistency of what had till then seemed to her erratic and incomprehensible. She loved him. She loved everything of him and about him : she loved him with all the hungry passion that was in her. He had come upon her in a dream, and she had awakened to find him striding colossally above her life. She had not fallen in love ; love had fallen upon her like a rushing avalanche. Her life had magically opened and broadened, as a river swells into the stormy sea. All the poetry in the world was about him. All the romance of days and nights was nothing but him. He had gilded everything in her life with new magic. He had poured new vision into her eyes, new thoughts into her brain, new music into her ears. Nothing of her was there which had not taken richer colour since his coming. He had infused poetry into all the world about her : he had breathed romance into every trivial thing of her life. He was in every sunrise and sunset, in every twilight, in every note of music that thrilled her. He was herself much more than she had ever been. . . . And she lay back amongst the

cushions and could realize all this in a single blinding flash. She saw everything revealed in this new light that had flamed up within her. And she was afraid, afraid, terribly afraid. . . .

The train swept out of the tunnel and bore swiftly down upon Upton Rising station like an eagle pouncing on its prey. The vision that had come to her had changed every metaphor. No longer was the train a placid, exquisitely dreaming creature wandering to and fro amongst the spreading suburbs : it had become terrible and impetuous, a rushing virago of flame and passion. And in the deepest cleft in which the station lay it hissed and screamed in strained malevolence. The platform shrieked in echo : the green lamps of the signal flashed mournfully as swathes of steam waved limply through them and beyond. The night was suddenly black and fearful. She stood on the platform and shivered, not from the cold, but from the terror that was in her soul.

" Come along," he said, walking to the steps that climbed to the station exit, and his words seemed to break the spell of horror. She became self-contemptuous and inclined to dose herself with cold logic. This is absurd, she told herself as she climbed the steps. An impossible state of things altogether, she decided, as she delivered up her ticket at the barrier. And as she stepped with him into the cool spaciousness of the High Road, she was energetically sermonizing herself. Conversation passed between them like a vague, irrelevant dream. At the corner of Gifford Road he shook hands and left her. And she knew with poignant emotion that she had displeased him. She knew with absolute certainty that her position was hopeless. The unutterable, unvanquishable horror came back to her : she saw a grim future of battle and defeat. And when she viewed herself in the mirror in her bedroom she noticed that her cheeks were pale and her eyes wide with fear. . . .

CHAPTER XVI

ALLEGRO CON FUOCO

§ 1

Reaction visited her. Walking along the sun-white pavements the next morning the self-revelation of the night before seemed incredibly absurd. It had rained during the night, and the cool scent of the gravel roadways seemed somehow to radiate the suggestion that life was cool and clear and fresh, to be taken light-heartedly and never to be feared. As she walked with springing step along the High Road, there seemed such an infinitude of interests in her life that she could afford to say : If I never saw him again it would not matter much. Every shop-window seemed bulging with reasons why, if she were never to see him again, it would not matter much. And when she stood by the counter in Burlington's music emporium and leisurely scanned through piles of pianoforte music, she decided sincerely and clinchingly : It is impossible that I am in love with him.

In the few novels she had read, being in love had been symptomized by dreamy abstraction, random melancholy, a tendency to neglect worldly duties, a replacement of clear-cut ambitions by a nebulous ideal. This was not true of her. Three hours of Chopin practising awaited her when she returned, and she was looking forward to it eagerly, enthusiastically. Never were her ambitions so clear and businesslike, never had she less time and inclination for dreamy abstraction and random melancholy.

The air was clean and clear as after a storm. She saw nothing but sheer absurdity in herself. She went back to Gifford Road and threw her whole soul into Chopin. That she was able to do so seemed to be convincing proof of

what she desired to prove. She wrote half a dozen letters, and as she methodically stamped the envelopes one after another she thought: This is life! Not emotional fireworks, but the sheer methodical doing of one thing after another. And I am not in love. . . . From the business-like stamping of her envelopes she extracted that subtle consolation. Somehow there existed in her the weird idea that being in love would militate against the successful stamping of envelopes. She was immensely, incalculably pleased at the decision she had come to. Thereafter, every action of hers confirmed it. When she went for a motor drive into the Forest and enjoyed it thoroughly, she thought: This shows that I cannot be in love. And when she played Chopin she felt vaguely: A person in love would not play Chopin like this. . . . She discovered that platonic friendship meant the friendship of men and women devoid of ulterior motives. . . . Henceforth she was a passionate disciple of platonism, ignorant of the fact that a disciple of platonism must never be passionate. She applied platonism thus: I can be friendly with him without being in love with him. I can be and shall be. He is capable of platonic friendship: so am I. . . .

§ 2

A time came when she told herself: I am changing. . . She was becoming more serious, less impressionable. Or so, at any rate, it seemed. Conversations with him had given her intellect a stimulus. She read Shaw and Ibsen, not so much to give herself ideas (though that result was inevitable) as to provide fascinating topics of discussion with him. For in those days Shaw was a rising and Ibsen a waning star in the intellectual firmament. Platonism was ever in her mind. She and Verreker met with moderate frequency, for his position as her concert organizer involved much business intercourse. They talked music and politics and economics and literature, and always she was afraid of two things, lest the conversation might flag, and lest she might make some absurd remark which would betray the poverty of her knowledge. And yet when she managed

to discuss with him intelligently she never imagined that she was deceiving him. She knew that he knew that all her knowledge was recently acquired, that her brain was only slightly above average, that she only imperfectly comprehended most of the topics she ventured remarks upon. An occasional remark of rank stupidity was almost inevitable under such conditions, and she knew it would not surprise him. He had no illusions about her which she could break. And yet the fear always hung over her when she was with him that some day she might say something irrevocably, catastrophically absurd. It was almost a relief to her when their meetings were over. The sensation was of having piloted a ship through a channel infested with rocks and succeeded somehow or other. Yet there was pleasure in the exercise. And she treasured up certain things he said, not for their intrinsic value, but because she had made him say them. . . .

She was quite sincere and enthusiastic about the platonic basis of their friendship. She almost sentimentalized about it. She deified it till it shone with a flame infinitely more dazzling than that of love. She despised love. Love was elemental. Basically, it was animal: she watched the couples strolling at twilight beneath the trees of the Ridgeway, and saw nothing in them but the primitive male seeking the primitive female. The poetry, the idyllic quality fell from the amorousness of men and women and revealed it to her as something of sheer brute passion. (A cold douche from one of Shaw's plays had assisted this transformation.) She felt herself consciously superior to these couples. She speculated on their thoughts, their conversations, their sympathies, and she almost despised them because their thoughts were not high, nor their conversations intellectual, nor their sympathies complex. She felt: the further and higher mankind develops the less prominence will be given to the merely brutish and physical aspect of passion. Until there shall at last be evolved the Higher Love, which is the union of twin affinities, indissolubly one by community of thought and sympathy and ideal. (This, by the way, she had read somewhere,

and her mind seized hold of it greedily.) She could not conceive of Verreker and herself as man and wife. But as twin-souls their future seemed promising; and the strictly platonic nature of their association was consecrated by the application of the twin-soul theory. She diligently read abstruse, religious-cum-pyschological works on the subject. She became possessed with a fierce enthusiasm for masculine camaraderie. Men, she thought, are easily able to enjoy delightful and perfectly platonic friendships with both men and women. Men have a greater capacity for friendship than women. They are less intensely sexual. They have a glorious sense of camaraderie which is as the breath of a gale over uplands. Whereas women are narrower, more passionate, maybe, in what attachments they do make, but incapable of realizing the male ideal of comradeship. She admired men for their wider and more spacious outlook on life. She became fond of the novels of Michael Fairless and Jack London. And, as a sort of reaction, she was profoundly affected by reading *The Hill*, Vachell's Harrow school story of a great friendship. Then she got hold of Wells' *Passionate Friends*, and it thrilled her by its seeming applicability to her own life. She felt, with some superiority: Most people would not understand this book. They would condemn it as unreal, exotic, untrue to life. But *I* understand it and know that it is very real and very true. . . . There were sentences in *Wuthering Heights* which she treasured as enshrining her ideal in words of passionate epigram. "Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same," was one of them. "I *am* Heathcliff!" she could scarcely read without poignant emotion. The enigma of Emily Brontë's life made her construct many theories to account for the peculiar passion of *Wuthering Heights*. . . .

Sometimes she would think proudly: This is an amazing friendship. We are people in a million. We are immeasurably higher in the human scale than those to whom such a relation as exists between us would be incomprehensible and incredible. It is not love that binds us—that reckless fuser of incompatibilities—it is an affinity of soul, rare, intense, exquisitely subtle. . . .

And also there were moments of terrible lucidity, when the subtleties and complexities resolved themselves into a single pattern of tragic simplicity. She loved him and he did not love her. The relation between them was compounded of nothing but that. Everything else was artificial and a sham. . . .

§ 3

Yet platonism was her acknowledged ideal. She was curiously anxious in discussions with him to emphasize it, even to rhapsodize upon it, to pour scorn on the sentimentality that finds it unworkable. She strove to re-create herself on the lines of what she strangely imagined would be his ideal of womanhood. And somehow this re-creation of herself was inextricably bound up with the paramount necessity that their relations must be strictly platonic. She would show him (and herself) that she was capable of maintaining such a relationship. She found a savage pride in the restraints she was called upon to exercise. She took fierce delight in saying things which were not only not true, but which were like knife-thrusts directed against her own heart. Her life became interwoven with intrigue against herself. As time passed, the complexity of what she was attempting began to demand ruthless self-suppression and a constant cumulative duplicity. Some of the traits of her newly manufactured character she identified so thoroughly with herself that she almost forgot whether they were real or not. Some of the lies that she told and acted became as real to her as the truth. Moments came when her brain as well as her soul went reeling under the burden of the tangle she had herself created.

One of the cruellest moments of her life was when she realized for the first time that she was capable of jealousy. Hitherto she had extracted a kind of pleasure from the thought: However passionate I may be, I am not jealous. I am above that. . . . This supposed quality in her seemed to raise her emotions and her desires above the common level, and she was always grateful for any excuse to lift

herself out of the world of ordinary passions and ordinary emotions. Her emotions lacerated her so much that she could not endure to think that she was one of millions suffering likewise. The communion of sorrow was no good to her. She wanted to be alone, to be unique, to be suffering more intensely than, or at any rate differently from the rest of the world. There was a subtle consolation in being a pioneer in experience. . . . And till now she had been able to think: My feelings cannot be quite the same as those of other people, because I am not jealous. . . .

It came upon her with terrible lucidity that the only reason why she had not been jealous was that there had been nobody to be jealous of. . . . She was playing Chopin in a small West-end concert hall. Verreker and Helen Trant were seated in the front row. (Helen was now his stenographer, shorthand-typist and general amanuensis.) Just before she started to play she glanced down at the audience. She noticed Verreker and Helen, they were both bending their heads close together as if sharing some confidence; also, they were both smiling. And Catherine speculated: Has anything that I have ever said made him smile like that? . . . She wanted to know what was the cause of their amusement. If she were with them she could ask. But here she was, condemned to play Chopin for an hour and a half, and by the end of the recital she knew that they would have probably forgotten the incident, even if she were to remind them of it. It was, no doubt, something ludicrously trivial and unimportant. Yet, whatever it was, it was being shared between Verreker and Helen. *She* did not come into it. And for a single blinding moment she felt angrily, contemptuously, vehemently jealous of Helen. . . .

Then she was scornfully angry with herself. And bitterly humiliated besides. For the fact of her jealousy placed her immediately on a level with all the thousands of girls she passed every day in the streets—girls who did not give Chopin recitals at West-end concert halls. . . . She played Chopin automatically. All the while she was bitterly reproaching herself.

Is it possible, she speculated, to get jealous over a strictly platonic friendship ? . . .

§ 4

Before long she had thoroughly convinced herself that Verreker, whether consciously or not, preferred Helen's companionship to her own. A fiendish pleasure in lacerating herself made her ever observant for trivialities that seemed to confirm her conviction. A word, a look, a quick movement of his became overcharged with significance. . . . And so ashamed was she of this miserable jealousy, so angry with herself for harbouring it, that she deliberately encouraged his friendship with Helen. She told him of Helen's splendidly sympathetic disposition, of her wonderful capacity for understanding, and of the staunchness of her friendship. She thrust Helen to the front whenever the three of them were together. She would say : " I'm sorry I'm engaged on Saturday afternoon, so I can't come to the opera. . . . But you and Helen go. Don't stay behind on my account." Sometimes Verreker would show evident reluctance at her withdrawal from the triangle of friendship. And this reluctance, rare and slight though it was, was worth all the pain she had inflicted on herself. This reluctance was the thing in her life that she treasured most.

She was becoming distinctly morbid.

From thrusting Helen forward at every opportunity, her morbidity developed into the deeper folly of avoiding him herself. If she met him in company she would treat him curtly. Her one aim was that he should notice the change in her demeanour. He did so after a week or so of this treatment, and his manner to her became curiously tender and sympathetic. And although she knew the terrible morbidity of her manœuvring, she drank in his tenderness and sympathy until he had seemingly no more to give. She knew the situation could not last, but she had not the courage to put an end to it. Something impelled her to accentuate the curtness that had produced such bitter-sweetness for her. She did so, and overreached herself. His sympathy vanished ; if she avoided him, he

avoided her as much if not more. And all the time friendship with Helen was growing apace: Catherine's withdrawal left the two of them more than ever together. . . . Secretly, Catherine was conscious that she was ruining whatever relationship existed between Verreker and herself. She had only herself to blame.

Casually, unostentatiously, she slipped back into the triangle. But her position was subtly different from before. The difference was indicated by his manner of inviting her to concerts, theatres, etc. Formerly he said: "I am going to the opera to-night: would you and Helen care to come?"

But now he said: "Helen and I are going to the opera to-night: would you care to come with us?"

It betokened a change, subtle, but of immense significance. And to endure it was all the harder, because Catherine knew that she was entirely responsible for it herself.

§ 5

His character began to unfold itself to her in spasms of intimate revelation. But with each passing glimpse of something new she caught sight also of dim vistas of his soul, which she knew she could never explore. The more she learned the more she felt she could never learn.

He was tremendously ambitious.

Once he said to her: "If you knew my ambitions, if you knew what I hope to do some day, you'd be amazed, absolutely amazed!"

"Should I?" she replied. "I don't know. . . . I'm very ambitious myself." She was pleased that she was incidentally speaking the truth.

He looked at her sceptically.

"My ambition is to be a great pianist," she continued quietly.

"That," he replied, "is a thoroughly selfish ambition. It is not as bad as some selfish ambitions, but it is selfish, for all that. Unless you have some other ambition in life besides that, your life will never be really worth while. . . . Now my ambition has nothing to do with my own greatness or fame. There is no fame—except of a secluded

kind—to be got from economics and sociology. . . . But nevertheless my ambitions are bound up with those things. Quite impersonally. . . . I mean . . ." he was searching for some method of explanation. "In fact," he added with a trace of bitterness, "I mean something you can't understand and never could."

It was true: she knew it, but she said with real passion: "How do you know? I *could*, but you never give me a trial! I believe I *could* understand, anyway!"

He smiled, sceptically, but not contemptuously. "Then what do you imagine to be my ambitions?" he asked quietly.

And she was floored. In her deepest soul she told herself: I haven't an idea. The man is an enigma to me. How do I know his ambitions?

"I suppose," she faltered, "you want to benefit humanity and—and——"

"And all that sort of thing, eh?" he interrupted sardonically. "You certainly ought to finish up that way."

"Don't be sarcastic. . . . Am I right?"

"Of course you are right," he replied whimsically, and left much to be implied.

"Then I knew what you didn't think I knew?"

"Oh no, not at all. . . . My doubts were not of your knowledge. . . . It is a question of understanding. . . ."

"And I am not capable of that, eh? That's what you mean, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid it is. . . ."

There came a pause. An overmastering impulse made her say something which, if she had been wiser, she would have been content to think.

"But I read!" she cried passionately, "I ought to be able to understand! . . . I sympathize with all those—things . . . I read heaps of books—Shaw and Wells and—and——"

It was absurd. She knew that what she was saying was quite absurd. But she was not quite prepared for his reply.

He stroked his chin reflectively.

"And what the devil," he said deliberately, "has *that* got to do with it?"

She bit her lip heroically. She was on the point of bursting into uncontrollable tears. Her eyes flashed wet and lustrous. And as she realized the pivotal significance of his reply, a great fragment of her universe tumbled to ruin. . . .

They were strolling at a leisurely pace along the High Road. It was a late October afternoon, and Catherine was playing at a London concert in the evening. She was now well known: a poster depicting her red hair and a post-impressionist keyboard was a familiar sight in the district between Upper Regent Street and the Marble Arch. Also her name in spidery capitals was a common feature of that wonderful front page of the Saturday *Telegraph*. Undoubtedly she was "making a name for herself." Also money. She was thinking of buying a car and learning to drive. And she began to regard it as inevitable that some day she would have to leave Mrs. Carbass. A tiny cottage near High Wood appealed to her. There was a large garden, and the Forest surrounded it almost completely. It would be idyllic to live there. . . .

It piqued her that her rapid rise to fame made no difference at all to her relations with Verreker. He treated her exactly as he had always treated her—that is to say, rudely, disrespectfully, sometimes contemptuously, always as a master dealing with a pupil. She admired him for his absolute lack of sycophancy, yet there were times when she almost wished for an excuse for despising him. Especially since the very things that hurt her were among those that drew her admiration.

Now she was stormily resentful because she had not succeeded in imposing on him. She had desired to appear capable of sympathy and understanding: she had striven to guide their relations into the paths of "soul-affinity." He had dealt a death-blow to that particular sphere of enterprise.

For several hundred yards they walked on in silence. Then he began to talk, as if recording impressions just as they crossed his vision.

"You know," he started, "when you consider the thousands of millions that inhabit the world you must realize that the chance of anybody meeting the one person most ideally suited to him is so mathematically small as to be not worth considering. . . . We all have to put up with either nothing at all or the thousandth or the millionth best. . . . Somewhere in the world there is, no doubt, somebody who would fit in with me so exquisitely that every phase of my life and endeavour would be the better for the fusing of two into one. . . . Same with you. . . . But what earthly chance is there of either of us ever discovering that person? Talk about looking for a needle in a haystack! It's worse than that: you do know the needle when you have found it, but if a man were to meet his ideal partner, the chances are he wouldn't recognize her! . . . I tell you, the quest of an ideal mate is hopeless from the start. If you're extraordinarily lucky, you may get somebody not many thousand places down on the list that is headed by that theoretical ideality who lives in the next street or the next continent. . . ."

"And what if you're not extraordinarily lucky?" she put in.

"Providence, or whatever you choose to call it," he replied, "has realized that the vast majority of people cannot in the nature of things be extraordinarily lucky. But providence has wisely contrived that if a man is unable to get the woman he wants, there is at least one method by which he can be made to want the woman he gets."

"And what is the method?"

"Very simple. . . . Falling in love with her."

"I suppose you don't agree with falling in love?"

He laughed.

"You might as well ask me if I agreed with eating and drinking. Certainly a good deal of time and labour would be saved if we didn't have to perform these functions. . . . What I object to in falling in love (and it's a purely personal objection: I mean it applies to me and not necessarily to anybody else) is simply that it's such a monopolizer of energy. . . . I'm one of those people who're used to doing

many things at once. There are heaps of important things in my life that love has never had anything to do with and never could have . . . and yet love, if it were violent enough, and if I were weak enough, might completely paralyse them for a time" . . . He began searching for a simile—"like," he added, "like a perfectly loyal and orderly body of workpeople compelled to take a rest because of a strike hundreds of miles away that has really no connection with them at all. . . ."

She nodded.

"There is, or ought to be, in every man and woman some divine sense of purposefulness, some subtle foretaste of greater things that would make life worth living if everything else were taken away. And it ought to be completely independent of and separate from every other living creature in the world. Call it personality, or 'ego,' or anything you like. It is above jealousy and envy. It gives every man a sunken indestructible pride in being himself and no one else. That's where novelists, sentimental folk and such like make their mistake. They give love far too prominent a place in the scheme of things. . . . Love is only one phase of life. At critical moments no doubt it does take precedence of everything else, but think of the heaps of other things that go to make up life! Ambition, for instance. And ideals. . . . A man may have ideals so utterly removed from all connection with love that if they were blurred by any act of his, love would be a worthless recompense. . . . Oh yes, falling in love may be a passably pleasant means of frittering away a dull seaside holiday, but for a busy ambitious spirit it spells—usually—ruination—unless—unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless," he resumed, "the fates were so miraculously thoughtful as to provide such a man with somebody whose dreams and hopes and ambitions were in mystic harmony with his own. . . . And that, of course, is a miracle not to be expected once in a hundred years. . . ."

Pause.

"And it is such a confoundedly casual business too,"

he went on. "Falling in love, I mean. It's about as sudden and spontaneous and unreasonable and unthought-out as walking down a railway platform beside a train of empty carriages and selecting one compartment in preference to all the others. . . . And think of the horror of falling in love, not merely with somebody you don't like, but with somebody you actively dislike. Oh, I assure you, it's quite possible. Some wretched creature with whom fate had capriciously made you infatuated! Someone who would monopolize selfishly everything in you that was free and open to all; someone who would divert everything high and noble in you to swell that tragic outflow of wasted ambitions, warped enthusiasms, cramped souls and stunted ideals! And someone, moreover, who would make it hard for you to value the people you liked but did not love! Think of it—all your life thrown out of perspective by something as casual and involuntary as a hundred unremembered things one does every day of one's life!"

They had entered the station-yard. It was beginning to rain in big, cold drops

"I suppose you think intellectual attachments are all right?" she remarked.

He grunted.

"If you want to know my candid opinion," he replied gruffly, "intellectual attachments, so called, are all bosh. If you like a clever woman (or a clever man, for that matter), the feeling is not, properly speaking, intellectual. And if you merely feel æsthetic admiration for somebody's nimble intellect, then I should say there was no real attachment."

"But I presume you prefer a woman should not be too intensely sexual?"

"If you mean do I prefer a woman who is half a man as well as not quite half a woman, I certainly do not. The best women, let me tell you"—(he began fishing out money from his pocket and advanced to the ticket office. Their conversation went spasmodically)—"are all sex." (He took the tickets and rejoined her slowly, counting his change as he did so.) "Let me see, what was I saying?

Oh yes, I remember. . . . Well, the best women, as I say, are all sex—but—but "—(interruption while the man punched their tickets at the top of the steps)—" but not always. . . . All sex, but not always. . . . That's how it appears to me. . . . There's the train just coming in. Hurry along, or we shall have to get in anywhere. . . ."

§ 6

They were in time to select an empty first-class compartment. There the conversation was resumed, though not precisely where it had been broken off.

" You see," he went on, " there is a part of me that in the ordinary sense neither is nor could be in love with anybody. And that's this . . ." he touched his head. " My head is always capable of stepping in at the most awkward moments to tell me what a damn fool I am. . . . And I am so queerly constituted that I care more for what my head tells me than for any other advice in the world. I could not ignore its directions and still keep my own self-respect. . . . I said just now that providence had contrived that when a man can't get what he wants he can be induced to want what he gets by the mere incidental process of falling in love. . . . That's true enough generally, but it isn't in my case. All my life I've been wanting what I can't get. Dreams bigger than the world, ambitions beyond my own capabilities, visions higher than the stars—every idealist knows what that is. But I'm not merely an idealist. I like Debussy's stuff, but I like Bach's more, because Bach always knows what he's talking about. As an economist, I dislike froth and sentiment, which always obscures truth, and that's why I can't stand a lot of the music that would send the average idealist into the seventh heaven. Contrariwise, as you might say, my idealism creeps into my economic work and makes me see behind all the figures and documents the lives of men and women. And that's what a lot of economists can't see."

Pause.

" You see it's not in my power to want what I can get. I shall always be reaching for the impossible."

"Then you will never be satisfied," she said.

"No, never," he replied, "not even if I got what I wanted. . . . But you can't understand that, can you?"

She reflected.

"I don't know," she answered, hesitating, "whether I understand it or not."

And she thought passionately as she listened to him: Why can't I understand? Why am I not like him? Why is he on a plane different from mine? Why has providence brought us together when we are so far apart?

§ 7

On a dull December afternoon, Catherine stood in a tiny room at the back of the Guildhall at Cambridge. She was to play at a combined violin and pianoforte recital, arranged by the University Musical Society. She was tired, for the journey down had been tedious. Verreker was at York: he had discovered a pianoforte genius of twelve years old amongst the northern moors, and was very much engrossed in her. "Superb child," he had said of her to Catherine, and Catherine, knowing the rarity of his praise, had felt angrily jealous of her. Yet she knew that his enthusiasm was strictly professional: the girl was nothing to him: it was only her genius that counted.

Through the half open door that led to the platform Catherine could see the audience filtering in. Loosely dressed undergraduates and senile professors formed the bulk. From the drab walls the portraits of gaily caparisoned mayors and aldermen looked down in vacuous reproach. Queen Victoria presented her angular profile chillingly at one side of the platform: the only cheerful thing in the entire building was a large open fire, in front of which a crowd of undergraduates were standing. . . . Slowly the clock at the back of the hall climbed up to three. Catherine sighed. It was not often she felt uninterested in her work. But this afternoon the huge bulk of the Kreutzer Sonata loomed in front of her as burdensome as a cartload of stones to be shifted. She knew that her hands would perform their duty, just as a tired walker knows that his

legs will assuredly carry him the last long mile. But at the thought of the Sonata, with all its varying movements and repetitions of theme, the greatest violinist in England scraping away beside her, and a front row composed of doctors and bachelors of music, she shivered. She was annoyed at the ominous fact that she was not the least interested in music that afternoon. She was annoyed at the spiritless architecture of the Guildhall. She was annoyed because she knew she would have to start punctually at three.

Just as the minute hand of the clock was almost on the point of twelve, the door at the back of the room opened suddenly, and she caught a swift glimpse of a man in a huge fur overcoat and gloves. She was about to ask him his business when he turned his face to her. She started. A rush of overmastering joy swept over her. It was Verreker. The moment was delectable. To see him there when she had not expected him, when she did not know why he had come! Never in all her life was she so happy as in that moment. She was too joyful to speak to him. She just looked up into his face smilingly and took the hand he offered.

"Surprised to see me?" he began, and from his tone she knew he was in an unusually good humour.

"Yes. I thought you were at York."

"So I was till this morning. The child-genius is a fake. . . . I came down here to give a lecture on Economics . . . five o'clock in the Arts School. . . ."

"So you'll stay to hear me, then?"

"As long as I can stand it. . . . I've heard the Kreutzer till I'm sick of it. Still, it suits a Cambridge audience. . . . What'll you play if they ask for an encore?"

"I don't know . . . Debussy, maybe."

"Not after the Kreutzer. Give them something sweet and sugary. The adagio out of the Sonata Pathétique, for instance."

The conversation developed on technical lines.

Then the clock showed three. Catherine had to appear on the platform. Verreker disappeared by the back door

and reappeared shortly in the stalls as a member of the audience. The greatest violinist in England commenced to tune up. The secretary of the University Musical Society placed Catherine's music on the music rest, and prepared himself for the task of turning over the pages. Then the Kreutzer commenced. For over half an hour the performers worked hard, and then tumultuous applause indicated that Cambridge appreciated the sacrifice offered up at the altar of the academic muse. Beethoven had finally routed Debussy.

Catherine's solo was the *Rondo Capriccioso*. It was encored, and she played a simple minuet of Beethoven. Afterwards a Haydn Concerto was laboriously worked through, and by the conclusion of that the concert was over and the time a quarter to five.

Verreker saw her at the back entrance. He was in a hurry and had only time to say: "See me at the 'Varsity Arms Hotel at seven to-night." Then he snatched up a bundle of lecture notes and departed down Bene't Street.

§ 8

In Downing Street that afternoon she met Buckland, one of the leading professors of Economics. They had met several times before at Verreker's house at Upton Rising. After a few insignificant remarks Catherine said:

"So you have asked Verreker to come up and lecture, I notice?"

Buckland smiled.

"Well, we didn't exactly ask him. He asked himself. Of course, we are very glad to get him. As a matter of fact, he wrote to me saying he should be in Cambridge to-day and suggesting that I should fix up a lecture appointment for him. Only I'm afraid it won't be well attended: there has been such short notice."

The rest of Buckland's remarks were comparatively of no significance at all. All that mattered to Catherine was this sudden amazing revelation of something that Verreker had done. He had come to Cambridge, not primarily to deliver a lecture on Economics, but for something else

He had intended to come to Cambridge on this particular date, even if a lecture could not be arranged for. What, then, could be the real, the primary, the basic object of his visit? Obviously it was her concert that attracted him, and how could it be her concert? He had scores of opportunities of visiting her concerts in London. He was not (he had frequently asserted) an admirer of her playing. He knew she was going to play the Kreutzer Sonata, and he hated the Kreutzer Sonata. The Guildhall he had declared unequivocally to be the ugliest building in England. It could not be the concert that brought him to Cambridge. Then what could it be?

All the way from the café in Sidney Street to the University Arms Hotel, Catherine debated that question.

Could it be herself, for instance?

That was a very daring thought for her to think. For all the past was strewn with the memories of occasions on which he had insulted her, avoided her, ignored her, shown her as much consideration as if she were no more than the dust he trod on. And yet (it was strange that this had never entirely occurred to her before) this was no worse than the treatment he accorded to everybody. She had never known him to be polite. Even when he was trying to be so it was for him so consciously an effort that he appeared sarcastically urbane and nothing more. She had suffered his vagaries of temper no more than others who knew him. And their arguments! Was it not a subtle mark of his appreciation of her that he condescended to spend irritating hours explaining to her what a fool she was? Was not the very pain she had suffered something she might have treasured as indicating his deep and abiding interest in her?

He was standing at the entrance of the hotel when she came in sight. Not often since that night at the Forest Hotel had she seen him in evening dress, and now she was reminded poignantly of that far-off occasion with all its strangely distorted memories. He descended the steps to meet her. His handshake was cordial. The whole of his attitude towards her seemed different from anything she had previously experienced.

"Come into the lounge," he said, and took her arm. "I've been waiting for you."

She was ten minutes late, and was glad to think he had noticed it and had been kept waiting. And besides that, she was amazed at his cordiality, at the sudden phase of courtliness which prompted him to take her arm as they strolled down the hotel lobby. She felt that her arm touching his was trembling, and she summoned every effort, mental and physical, to curb this manifestation of her excitement. They entered the lounge and occupied adjacent positions on a chesterfield. The room was comfortably full of fashionably dressed men and women. Catherine felt that many eyes of recognition were upon her. But that caused her no thrill of pleasurable triumph. Her mind and soul were centred on this unique phenomenon that was unfolding itself to her by degrees—Verreker, the curt, the abrupt, the brutally direct, transformed into a veritable grandee of courtliness.

In the dining-hall they had a table to themselves that overlooked the dark spaciousness of Parker's Piece. Once again she was quaintly fascinated by the peculiarities of his table manners. In this respect, at any rate, he was still himself, and she marvelled at the intense personality that crowded into every movement, however bizarre and unconventional, of his knife and fork. Evening dress gave his weird facial expressions a touch of sublimity. She looked round at the other tables and compared him with men there. There was scarcely one that was not more handsome than he, certainly none whose table manners were not infinitely smoother and more refined. There were men whose cheeks and chin were smooth as a shave ten minutes ago could make them. A glance at Verreker showed that a razor had not touched him for at least twenty-four hours. Other men had hair carefully brushed and pomaded, artistically parted in the middle or at the side, compelled into spray-like festoons above the ears. But Verreker's hair was black and thick, coarse, horsey hair, innocent of pomade and parting, hair that he occasionally ran his fingers through without in any real sense disturbing. Other

men in the room were smiling with rows of white symmetrical teeth, speaking in cultured university accents, gazing with animated eyes at their fellow-diners. And yet she knew that compared with him they were all as nothing. The whole secret of him flashed out upon her. He was a man. His personality invaded everything he did and everything that belonged to him : it overflowed like a bursting torrent into his most trivial actions. With all his facial ugliness, his abrupt manners, his disposition, which people called "difficult," he was the towering superior of any man she knew. And not all the oiled and manicured youths in the world could give her what he could give. She looked triumphantly round the room as if to say : This man here, whom you all think is so ugly and ill-mannered, is, if only you knew it, the personal superior of every one of you ! . . . She was proud to be with him, proud of every bizarrerie in him of which others might be ashamed.

After dinner he led her into the lobby and said : "I want you to come up into my room for a little while. I have engaged a room with a piano in it."

Thrilled and excited, she went with him. The room was heavily and tastelessly furnished, the piano upright and metallic.

He did not seem particularly conversational.

After a silence he said :

"Oh, what was that little piece you played as an encore this afternoon ? "

"One of Beethoven's Minuets."

"Oh ?—I don't remember ever having heard it. Play it now, will you ? "

His courtliness had vanished, for he let her carry a chair to the piano unassisted.

Towards the conclusion of the piece he rose and stood at her elbow, leaning on the top of the piano. She could see him frowning. When she had finished, she was expecting some ruthless technical criticism of her playing.

But he stood for a long while in silence. Then he said gruffly :

"Damned sentimental. I thought as much."

"What do you mean?" she asked quietly.

He paused and commenced to walk about the room with his hands in his pockets.

"Look here," he began irritably, "when I heard that piece this afternoon I liked it very much. Then I asked myself why I liked it, and found it difficult to say. A sensible man should, of course, be prepared to give reasons for his likes and dislikes. 'Is it possible,' I asked myself, 'that you like the thing because it is sentimental?' I shuffled basely by telling myself: 'I don't know: I don't even remember if the thing *was* sentimental.' . . . Well, now I've heard it a second time and I know for certain. It *is* sentimental—damned oozy, slimy, slithery sentiment from beginning to end. And the question is: What the devil's the matter with me that I should have liked it this afternoon?"

She turned round to face him and laughed.

"How should I know?" she replied. "Perhaps *you're* getting sentimental."

"Heaven preserve me from such a fate," he muttered gruffly. "Play me a Bach's fugue to take that beastly sugary taste away."

She did so, but if ever an attempt was made to infuse sentiment into a Bach's fugue, it was on that occasion. All the while her soul was revelling in a strange airiness.

"Bach would turn in his grave if he could hear," was his sole comment when she had finished. "Get up and I'll show you how to do it."

Once again the relationship of master and pupil had ousted every other.

He played the same fugue over again, and she was lost in admiration of his supreme technical facility. Obviously this was Bach as he should be played, Bach as he was meant to be played, every note mathematically in place and in time; every arpeggio like a row of stones in one triumphant mosaic. She was not fond of Bach, and in her deepest self she knew that she disliked him for precisely the reason that Verreker liked him: he was so totally devoid of sentimentality. Yet she could not but admire the stern

purposefulness of his style : the lofty grace of his structures, that serene beauty of which, because it is purely aesthetic, one never tires.

When he had finished she said : "I want you to play some Debussy."

At first he seemed disinclined to accede to her request, but after a few seconds' pause he started a slow sarabande movement. She listened enraptured till the end.

" Isn't that sentiment ? " she asked.

" No," he replied curtly.

" Then what is it ? "

He ground his teeth savagely.

" Passion," he snapped.

" And what," she asked softly—her voice was trembling—" is the difference between sentiment and passion ? "

He looked at her searchingly.

" Don't you know ? "

" I may do—I'm not certain."

" Well, if you do know, you don't need me to tell you, and if you *don't* know, I can't tell you."

At a quarter past nine they went downstairs. Catherine was leaving by the 9.30 train to Liverpool Street. They left by taxi to the station. Fortunately the train was late, or they would have missed it. In the alcove formed by two adjacent open carriage doors Catherine and he stood and talked till the guard whistled for the departure of the train.

Their farewell was curious. She was leaning out of the window so that her head was above his. He sprang on to the footboard as the train was moving and seized her hand. She wondered what he was going to do. She thought perhaps he might be going to kiss her. She waited for what seemed hours and then he suddenly vanished into the gloom of the station platform. Almost simultaneously she heard a porter's raucous voice crying out : " Clear away there ! What d'yer think yer doin'——" The rest trailed into inarticulate sound. Obviously he had been pulled down.

The whole incident was somewhat undignified.

Yet all the way to Liverpool Street she was speculating on what he had been about to do when the porter pulled him away.

And she was happier than she had ever been in her life.

§ 9

In the bedroom of her cottage at High Wood, Catherine stood in front of the cheval glass and eyed herself critically. It seemed to her in that moment that a miracle had happened, a door unlocked to her that she thought would be for ever closed, a dream which she had scarcely dared to glimpse, even from afar, brought suddenly and magically within her grasp. A miracle indeed, and yet the very ease with which she acclimatized herself to new conditions gave almost the impression that the miracle had been to some extent anticipated, that she had so prepared and organized her soul that she could slip into the new scheme of things with a minimum of perturbation.

Standing before the mirror, she was surprised at her own calmness. And the more she pondered, the more stupendous seemed the miracle, and consequently the more amazing her own attitude. Already it seemed that she was beginning to take for granted what a day before had been a dream so far from fulfilment that she had scarcely dared to admit it into coherent form. A day ago the idea that her affection for Verreker was reciprocated seemed the wildest phantasy : she had not dared even to think of such a thing hypothetically, for fear it should grow into her life as something confidently expected : yet dim and formless it had lurked behind all her thoughts and ideas ; shadowy and infinitely remote, it had guided and inspired her with greater subtlety than she knew. But now it need no longer be dim and formless : it entered boldly into the strong light of day, into the definition of word and sentence : she could ask herself plainly the question, " Does he love me ? " because deep down in her heart she knew that he did. Her instinct told her that he did, but she was quite prepared to doubt her own instinct. She did not know that her feminine instinct in such a matter was nearly

infallible. But she was no longer afraid of treating herself to the random luxury of thinking and dreaming.

All at once she was seized with a terrible sense of absurdity and incongruity. Was it *possible*, was it even remotely conceivable that he should love her? She did not know that she was on the brink of the perennial mystery that has surprised millions of men and women: she felt that her question was singularly acute and penetrating. What was there in her that could attract him? Not her intellect, for he knew full well the measure of that. Not her musical genius, for he was not an admirer of it. Not her sympathies and ideals common to his, for she was incapable of understanding the major part of him. Nor even her beauty, for she was not beautiful. What, then, could it be? And the answer was that love, the force he despised, the elemental thing to which he conceived himself superior, had linked him to her by bonds that he had not the power to sever. The strong man had toppled. He suddenly ceased to be a god in the clouds and became a human being on her earth. Would his ideals crumble to dust at the touch of this mighty enslaving force? Would he shatter the dreams of a lifetime, those mighty dreams of his that had nothing to do with love, would he shatter them and lay the ruins at her feet? How would he reconcile the iron rigidity of his theories with the impulse of his passion?

There had been a time when she thought: All I want is his friendship, his sympathy, his understanding, the consciousness that our souls are affinite. Intellectual and spiritual sympathy with him, she had argued, is the summit of my ambition. To talk with him on terms of candid intimacy, to be the sharer of his deepest confidences, to realize in their relationship something of the glorious male ideal of camaraderie, that had been her grand aim. She had deceived herself. That was not so. In the moment that he stood on the footboard of the departing train at Cambridge every vestige of the platonic camouflage was torn from her. There was one thought that was infinitely more rapturous, infinitely more seductive and alluring, than even the thought that he and she were on terms of

deep intellectual and spiritual intimacy. And that was the thought that whilst he was standing there on the footboard he was wondering whether to kiss her. If now her platonic dreams were to be fulfilled, she would be strangely and subtly disappointed. Deep communion with a godlike personality was fine. But she preferred the impulse that changed the deity into a man, that dragged him from the stars into the streets, that caused all his dreams and ideals to be obscured by that single momentous triviality, the desire to kiss her.

She was cruel, merciless in her hour of seeming triumph. She loved him more passionately than ever now that he was a being dethroned from heaven. She had thought formerly: I cannot understand him: we are on a different plane. But now she thought: He has come down to my plane. One thing at least I can understand: I can understand why he wanted to kiss me. And that crude fragment of understanding was more precious to her than all the subtleties and spiritual nuances which had made his soul a hitherto uncharted sea.

If she could break his ideals, if she could shatter everything in him that had nothing to do with her, she would be glad. Already, not content with the footing she had gained on what had seemed an unscalable cliff, she wanted to dominate the heights and destroy everything that was independent of her. Never had the essential selfishness of her nature so revealed itself. She grudged him every acre of his soul that was not sown with seeds of her own planting. She wanted him, all of him, passionately, selfishly: his soul and intellect would be for ever beyond her, so she was jealous of their freedom. That he should fall from the lofty heights of his idealism was epic, a thing of high tragedy, yet thrilling with passion: that she should be the means of it was something that convulsed her with rapture. Her passion was terrible and destructive. She wanted it to scorch his soul until he desired nothing save what she could give. She wanted entire possession of him: she grudged him everything that was beyond her comprehension.

§ 10

All this was somewhat premature.

As yet he had not spoken a word save what was easily compatible with disinterested friendship. He had treated her many times with such curtness and incivility that it seemed absurd on the face of it to imagine that he could love her. And yet there was in her that strange instinct which told her that he did.

After her return from Cambridge she began to wonder when she should see him again. Since she had left Mrs. Carbass and had taken the cottage at High Wood, he had been a moderately frequent visitor. He liked the situation of " Elm Cottage," he liked to sit in a deck-chair on the lawn and watch the sun dipping down over the roofs of Upton Rising. The æsthetic pleasure made him talkative and companionable. In the summer time she would open the windows and play Debussy on the baby grand piano she had bought. She had furnished the interior in masculine taste. There were great brown leather armchairs of the kind common enough in clubs, and innumerable facilities for smoking (she was not a great smoker herself), and a general atmosphere of freedom and geniality. She had bought an expensive club-fender with leather seats at either end and a leather rail, because she had noticed that at his own house he liked to sit with his back to the flames. The front room was really very comfortable and cosy, though she was lost when she sat in either of the two great armchairs.

There was no particular business reason why he should see her, yet for several nights after his return to Upton Rising she expected him to come. She laid in a stock of his favourite cigarettes : she diligently learned a little known and mathematical work of Bach because she knew he would appreciate it. But he did not come. Then she had a spell of concerts which kept her in town until nearly midnight : he did not come to see her after the performance, as he sometimes did, so that she did not know if he had been among the audience or not. She knew that he had returned

from Cambridge, and she knew that an abstruse work on sociology was occupying a good deal of his time and attention. Yet it seemed strange that he did not visit her. Their farewell on Cambridge platform was already past history, and she sometimes found it hard to believe it had taken place at all. She wanted further proof that it was no delusion. She felt that every day made that incident more isolated, more inconsistent, more meaningless. And in another sense every day was adding to its tremendous significance.

A fortnight passed and still he did not come. She did not want to go and see him. She wanted him to come and see her. She made a vow: I am not going to see him; I am going to wait till he comes to see me: if he doesn't want to, he needn't. And she was glad when a concert or other engagement kept her busy in the evenings, for the temptation to break her vow was strong if she were alone at "Elm Cottage."

On Christmas Day the temptation was overmastering. An offer from a Scotch concert agency had come by post that morning, and she found it easy to persuade herself that she had to visit him to talk it over.

Snow was falling through the skeleton trees on the Ridgeway as she approached "Claremont." Through the window of the front room she could catch the glow of leaping flames. That indicated that he was at home. He had no relatives and no friends of the kind that would share Christmas Day with him. Besides, he was quite impervious to the Christmas type of sentimentality. Yet possibly he would be pleased to see her.

She found him sitting on the club-fender with the fire behind him. He was reading long proof-slips. As she entered he merely glanced up casually.

"Come in," he drawled, and went on correcting until he had finished the slip.

There are no words to convey how deeply that annoyed her.

"Well," he began, when the last marginal correction had been inserted, "and how are you getting on?"

"All right," she asserted, with some pique. Then, in a spitefully troubled tone: "What have *you* been doing with yourself since you came back from Cambridge?"

He pointed to the litter of proof-slips on the floor.

"Working," he replied.

"I half expected you'd come and see me," she remarked tentatively.

"So did I," he replied quietly, "but I didn't after all. . . ."

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean I half thought I might visit you. I really didn't know. . . ."

"I suppose you didn't want to."

"On the contrary, I wanted to very much. That was just why I didn't."

"I don't quite——"

"Listen. Did I ever tell you that I detest worms?"

"No, but what——?"

"Well, I do. I can't stand them at any price."

"Nor can I, but how——"

"Listen. When I was a tiny boy it used to send me almost into hysterics if I touched one, even by accident. Well, when I grew older, I used to despise myself for being so weak-minded. I used to gather all the worms I could find, fat juicy ones, you know, with red bellies, put them all into one single writhing heap and run my fingers through the lot! My flesh crept with the loathsomeness of it: I was often sick and gasping with horror after I had done it. But it gave me confidence, because it taught me I wasn't at the mercy of arbitrary feelings. It showed me that I had myself under iron control. . . ."

"Well?"

"Since I returned from Cambridge I have wanted to see you so often and so intensely that it seemed to me a capital opportunity for finding out if that iron control had at all relaxed. . . . I am pleased to say that it has not done so."

"But you wanted to see me?"

"I did."

" Then what on earth was there to keep you from coming to visit me ? "

" Nothing at all except this—my own desire to be complete master of myself—greater even than my desire to see you."

" Why did you want to see me ? "

" I could think of no sensible reason for desiring to see you, and that was why I decided not to."

" Are you glad I have come now ? "

" No. I am sorry. You have interrupted my work."

" Have I ? Thanks for telling me. Then I'll go——"

' Your going would not alter the fact that my work has been interrupted. I shall do no more work to-day, whether you go or not. I—I "—his voice became thick with anger, or scorn, or some complex combination of the two—" I have—been—spiritually interrupted ! "

She took off her thick furs and muff.

" I'm going to stay," she said quietly, " and we're going to have tea and then go for a walk. I think you and your arguments are very silly."

It was immensely significant, that final sentence of hers. Before, she would never have dared to say such a thing to him. But now she felt he was in some strange way delivered into her power : she was not afraid of treating him like a baby. The truth was, he was no longer a god to her. And her task was, if possible, to strip from him the last remnants of his divinity. His strange conversation she had but half understood : but it immensely reassured her as to this subtle and mysterious power she possessed over him. But she divined that her task was difficult : she feared an explosion that would be catastrophic. The atmosphere was too tense for either comfort or safety : she would have to lower the temperature. And all the time her own heart was a raging furnace within her.

" Mrs. Tebbutt is out," he said gruffly. " I'm hanged if I know where anything is. I was going to go out to tea at Mason's." (Mason's was the café in the Bockley High Street.)

" How like a man not to know where anything is ! " she commented lightly, removing her hat. " Never mind,

I'll soon find out. And you'll be saved the trouble of going to Mason's."

She discovered it was absurdly easy to treat him like a baby.

She found crockery and food without much difficulty, and while she was making tea he followed her about from room to room, chatting quite genially. His surliness seemed to vanish entirely: he became charmingly urbane. Evidently her method of treatment had been completely successful. The tension of the atmosphere had been very much lowered, and he seemed quite schoolboyish in his amateur assistance at what he called "indoor picnicing." As she emerged from cupboards carrying cups and plates and fancy cakes he looked at her very much as if she were a species of conjurer.

They behaved just like a couple of jolly companions as they sat round the fire and had tea.

§ 11

Afterwards he became less conversational.

"Leave the things," he commanded. "Mrs. Tebbutt will see to them when she gets back."

"All right," she agreed. "Now we're going for a walk, eh?"

"I've got heaps of work——" he began.

"Not on Christmas Day," she urged.

"Oh, that makes no difference."

"Besides, you said you weren't going to do any more work, in any case."

"No—but—I thought of dropping in at the Trants."

Impossible to describe the fierce stab of jealousy that passed through her. It changed her mood completely.

"Mr. Verreker," she said, with emotion, "after a fortnight of not seeing me, can't you spare me one evening?"

"Of course if you've anything particular to say to me—any help you want—of course—I——"

"Not that! That's not the point. Mayn't I never come to you except when I've something definite I want to ask you for? Aren't we friends?"

"Certainly."

"Then why can't you come out with me when I ask you to?"

"Oh yes, I will, but——"

"You're the only friend I have. Don't you know that?"

"I'm sorry to hear it. I am bound to say it is to some extent your own fault that you have not more."

They were standing in front of the fire. At this last remark she moved till her face was a few inches from his. Her eyes were flashing with anger, yet dim with tears like a mirror breathed upon: her hands were clenched and quivering as if she were thinking to strike him. All her body, every limb and muscle of her, was vibrant with passion.

"Mr. Verreker," she cried, "why do you keep saying things that hurt me? Am I nothing to you at all? Don't you care one tiny scrap for what I feel? Oh, I know I'm very imperfect—I daresay I'm all wrong, to your way of thinking, but have you ever lifted a finger to make me different? Have you ever cared whether I was different or not?"

"I have helped you always as much as I have been able," he replied, with dignity.

"Then why do you treat me as you do? Why do you despise me? You *do* despise me! I know you do. Why do you feel that you ought to control yourself just because you have a desire to come and see me?"

"Not because I despise you. I despise nobody. Who am I to——"

"There you are again! Do you think I'm not clever enough to see the sly way you wriggle off the point? I'm not as clever as you, maybe, but I am clever enough to be hurt by what you say! The only way you can truthfully say you don't despise me is by saying you don't despise anybody! Do you really think I am dull enough not to see that? Oh, Mr. Verreker, what *have* I done? What *have* I done?"

"You are being foolish, Miss Weston. . . . You have——"

"Miss Weston now, eh? Something else. Do you think

I don't notice these things? Do you know the last time you ever called me Cathie? I don't suppose you remember, but I do: it was on May 19th last. Over six months ago."

"This is childish," he muttered scornfully, and his lips curled in contempt. He turned away from her and began walking about the room.

"Childish, is it?—Is it childish to be hurt at little things that show you're going down—in the—estimation of people you—you—whom you like?"

"I have given you no valid indication that you have gone down in my estimation."

"Do you deny that I have?"

"It is a matter I do not care to discuss. . . . At any rate you have grossly exaggerated the whole affair. . . ."

"What I want to know is, why are you disappointed with me? Why have you left me alone this last fortnight?"

"I have already told you that I wanted to see you very intensely."

"Why?"

"I can think of no satisfactory reason."

"What do you mean by 'satisfactory'?"

"I mean what I say. I can think of no reason satisfactory to me—that satisfies me."

"And aren't there any reasons at all why a normal person might wish to see me?"

"Arguing is quite useless if you accept as a hypothesis that I am a normal person."

"Aren't there any reasons at all, then, why you might want to come and see me?"

"Possibly there are."

"Couldn't you think of any?"

"No, I could not."

She became fiercely passionate again.

"Mr. Verreker," she said, "I'll tell you one thing for your own good, and for the good of everybody you meet who gets to know you well. You ought to be more kind. You ought to consider other people's feelings. You ought

not to say things that hurt. You ought to put yourself on the level of people who feel. Do you know you have hurt me more than ever I have been hurt before ? "

She was crying now. She leaned on the back of a chair and bent her head on her hands. There was something very wildly tragic in her attitude.

And he was profoundly stirred. He had not believed her capable of such passionate outburst. For a moment he stood perfectly still, viewing her from that part of the room to which his pacings up and down had chanced to lead him at the moment. Then he slowly approached her cowering form. She was sobbing violently. He put his hand lightly on her shoulder and drew it away immediately. The spectacle of her grief made him curiously embarrassed. He seemed afraid to touch her.

" Cathie," he spoke gruffly.

She made no sign of answer. But the sobbing stopped, and in a moment she raised her head. She stood upright, with her head flung backwards and her face turned to his. She was not beautiful, but passion had given her face a spiritual sublimity. Tears were still in her eyes and down her cheeks ; her eyes, dim and blurred, were shining like the sun through the edges of April clouds. And all about her head and face and shoulders her hair was flung in gorgeous disarray. Red as flame it was, and passionate as the whole look and poise of her.

He bent to her very simply and kissed her on the forehead. There was no hungry eagerness about his movement, yet the very simplicity of it seemed to indicate terrific restraint. She stood perfectly still, as if hypnotized.

" Now," he said quietly, " you and I are friends again, aren't we ? "

She nodded. There was the grating of a key in the lock of the front door. They both waited in silence. Then there were footsteps in the hall.

" Mrs. Tebbutt ! " he called. He was tremendously, inexpressibly relieved at her arrival.

Mrs. Tebbutt, discreet as always, opened the door and entered.

"You might come and clear these things away, will you?" he said, in a perfectly ordinary tone.

"Very good, sir."

The spell was broken.

Catherine did not stay long after that. Conversation between them was difficult because it was carefully commonplace. Mrs. Tebbutt kept coming in and out. And when Catherine left, his handshake at the gate was just normally cordial, neither more nor less so than usual. . . .

CHAPTER XVII

THE CRISIS

§ 1

WALKING amongst the trampled snow of the Ridgeway, it was difficult for her to decide the significance of what had happened. It was not easy to determine how far her passionate outburst had been a thing of art and how far she had been unable to restrain it. Not that her passion was in any sense unreal or artificial ; but her aim had been to excite his sympathies and she had succeeded so well that it was hardly possible to regard her actions as entirely unpremeditated. There had been such consummate artistry on her part that it seemed impossible that for a single moment could she have entirely abandoned herself to her feelings. Yet her tears had been thoroughly genuine, and she was speaking the truth when she said that he had hurt her more than she had ever been hurt before.

His attitude to her, too, was puzzling. She wanted to break down that iron control which he held over himself. And she seemed as far away as ever from doing it. His kiss had been a thing of careful precision. She could feel the restraint he was imposing on himself and she could discern also that he was capable of much greater restraints than that. His kiss was not like the kiss she might have received had not the porter pulled him down from the footboard. Even now she was instinctively conscious that that moment as the train was leaving the platform at Cambridge represented the high-water mark of his relationship with her. With all her efforts she had not induced in him a repetition of that singularly rare mood of his. And now, moreover, he was on his guard. The struggle would be epic.

She was gratified that he loved her. Though she knew how desperately he would fight against submission to her, though she knew the great intellectual and spiritual gulf between them which made him desire above all things that he should retain his complete freedom and independence, yet the mere fact that he loved her was capable of giving her intense satisfaction. And once again she was terrifically jealous of his wider interests and sympathies. She was utterly, inhumanly selfish. She knew it, and it hurt her infinitely to know it, and to know that he knew it. Some demon had entered her soul at birth and dominated her ever selfishly, and try as she would she could not shake it off. She could not repress her own miserable jealousies, her own contemptible conceit, her own despicable selfishness. In her own heart she knew that Verreker despised her, and that he had a right to do so. All the joy of finding her love reciprocated was tinged with the melancholy of realizing the rottenness of her own soul. There were moments when she felt she was spiritually damned, that a canker was eating at her soul which would leave her unworthy to live. And yet, with more than a touch of hysteria, she consoled herself with the thought that he loved her: she was abundantly, rapturously happy about that, using it to mask the horror of her own soul, as one who dances heartlessly on the very brink of destruction. . . .

§ 2

It was New Year's Day when she saw him next. He was walking down the slope to Bockley Station, and she was coming up from one of the trains.

A dim presentiment of coming tragedy overswept her as she saw him coming, so that, without knowing exactly why, she would not have stopped of her own accord. But he insisted on stopping and shaking hands, and wishing her a happy new year (a touch of sentimentality which she was surprised to hear from him).

Even then a dim foreshadowing of something monstrously like destruction impelled her to try to get away. She was surprised, awed at her own instinctive impulse. She could

not think what she had to be afraid of. And yet she was afraid—terribly afraid. A black cloud was descending upon her. She must get away from him at all costs.

But he insisted on detaining her.

"There was some fine skating on the High Wood pond last night," he said; and she said: "Was there?"

"Did you go up?" he asked; and she said: "No: I didn't know there would be any."

"Can you skate?" he asked; and she said: "Not on the ice—only on rollers."

And he laughed and said: "You ought to learn—it is a fine exercise. I expect there will be some more to-night if it doesn't snow."

And deep and dim within her was the awful premonition of doom. All this small talk about skating and ice and snow brought the black cloud almost to the level of her eyes.

Then he said: "By the way, I've a bit of news for you."

She did not remember whether she enquired, "What is it?" or just remained silent.

"Miss Trant and I are engaged to be married."

"Is that all?" she said lightly. "I thought—oh, I thought—oh, well, congratulations!"

"I have accepted a post at Harvard University in the States, and Miss Trant and I are to be married very soon and take up our position there."

"Still as your amanuensis?—she, I mean?"

"Yes—to a certain extent. Of course, I may have to employ a typist to do the heavy work."

"Of course."

"I have never been to the States."

"Nor have I. . . . I suppose they are . . . very different."

"Possibly. . . . I can recommend you to a good organizer, if you would rather not manage for yourself. . . . Though I would recommend the latter."

"Concerts, you mean?"

"Yes. Most organizers will want a big commission. . . . Why not do it yourself? . . . I believe in being independent. . . ."

" So do I . . . perhaps I will. . . ."

" You ought to have a successful run in Scotland. . . . Of course, if you should ever come to the States . . . we should be pleased to see you. . . ."

" Oh yes, I would certainly visit you. Let me see, did you say Harvard ? That's Massachusetts, isn't it ? "

" Yes. . . . I'll let you know the exact address when I know it . . . my train is signalled . . . I am going up to town to arrange for a sailing next month . . . or the end of this. . . ."

" Yes ? . . . is Helen quite well ? "

" Very well . . . she does not see much of you now . . . but of course both she and you are busy. . . ."

" She will like the voyage . . . she is a good sailor. . . ."

" Oh ? "

" Yes . . . we once went to Yarmouth . . . it was very rough . . . but she was all right. . . ."

" That's good . . . my train . . . well, I'll write you the address. . . . I wish you all success . . . good-bye . . ."

" Good-bye."

Their hands met, clasped and unclasped, silently, meaninglessly.

The cloud broke and fell. . . .

She climbed the slope on to the white highway. . . .

Out in the High Road she boarded a passing tram, caring not whither it was going. She climbed to the top deck, which was uncovered, and sat on a seat that was filmed over with lately fallen snow. There was nobody else on the top deck, and the conductor, when she tendered him a penny without speaking, eyed her curiously. The car purred slowly along the High Road, stopping at all the old familiar halting-places, stopping sometimes because of men who were shovelling snow and slush into the gutters. Every time it stopped she could hear the driver on his platform beating his gloved hands together and swinging his arms noisily across his chest. It was very cold, and the wind swept down the wide High Road like a demon unchained. Overhead the trolley-wheel screamed shrilly

along the wires, and every time it passed the supporting wire between the opposite tramway standards it gave a sharp, excruciating sound—like a little kiss. At the Ridgeway Corner there was a long wait, and the driver and conductor disappeared into a coffee-house by the roadside. Far ahead the High Road stretched grey and melancholy, with the snow and slush piled high along the gutters. The tram-rails were running rivulets, and each passing car sprayed the brown water over the roadway. . . .

At High Wood the conductor climbed the steps and began turning the handle to alter the destination board of the car. Then he swung down the rope from the trolley-pole and said: "Don't go beyond 'ere, miss. . . . Git a bus if yer want ter go any further. . . ." Catherine clambered down. After all, she did not want to go any further. This was High Wood; she was quite near home. . . .

The path through the Forest to "Elm Cottage" was ankle deep in mud and slush. . . . As she passed the clearing that was about half-way, she saw that the sky was grey with falling flakes. He had said: "I expect there will be some more skating to-night if it doesn't snow." But it was snowing now. There would be no skating. It did seem a pity. So many people would be disappointed. . . . She could see the smoke rising sluggishly from the chimney-pots of "Elm Cottage." The footpath to the porch was white with untrodden snow. . . .

In the drawing-room the first things she saw were the boxes of cigarettes which she had bought because she knew they were his favourite brand, and the Bach's Fugue which she had learned because she knew he would like to hear it.

She sat down on the fender rail in front of the fire without removing any of her wraps. The fatness of a tear-off calendar on her bureau annoyed her by its unaccustomedness. It was the first day of a new year. The mantelshelf was stacked with Christmas and New Year cards, chiefly from people she did not know. . . .

Oh, well, she told herself, if I was wrong, then I was wrong. . . . If he's in love with Helen, then he's in love

with her. That's all there is to it. . . . Anyway, it's the sort of thing that might happen to anybody . . . what's happened to me, I mean. . . .

She flung off her furs and muff on to the floor. Her feet were wet, despite goloshes. She removed her shoes and put on slippers. Then, as if impelled by a sense of duty, she picked up the furs and muff and carried them to the piano, laying them on the closed soundboard. . . .

She was just tired, physically, mentally and spiritually. . . .

Even *she* had realized the awful selfishness of her soul. It was that which was hurting her far more than she knew. She could not quite analyse her feelings. But Verreker's attitude had made her terribly conscious of her own inferiority. It hurt her to think that he despised her. Her soul was rotten, there was no health in her. . . . There was a sense in which Verreker's engagement to Helen gave her a ray of spiritual hope, even if it subjected her to fierce pangs of jealousy. If he were in love with Helen and not with herself, that would sufficiently explain his casualness towards her. And he could not, presumably, help being in love with Helen. . . . Being in love with Helen did not necessarily indicate that he despised *her*. She suddenly realized that if she were convinced that he despised her all the hope would vanish out of her life. His conviction of her unworthiness would prove to her finally that her life was not, in the truest sense, worth living. That he was not in love with her was a deep disappointment, a bitter blow, beyond all doubt, but it was at most an accident. But that he deliberately and calculatingly pierced the selfishness and baseness of her, and despised her utterly from the depths of his being, she could not bear to think of. . . .

Fiercely she turned upon her inmost nature and examined it ruthlessly. The spectacle was appalling. Her soul was eaten up with selfishness and jealousy and conceit. Everything in her past life had been inspired by one or other of these three leading motives. One or other of them was the clue to nearly everything she had ever done, to nearly

every attitude she had ever adopted, to nearly every relationship that had ever entered her life. Her escape from home, her episodes of friendship with George Trant, all were evidences of her love of self. Her past was strewn with the wreckage of things that could not live in the atmosphere of her own spiritual avarice. And now her friendship with Verreker had broken under the strain placed upon it. If he were in love with Helen really and truly she could bear it. But if she thought that he saw in her own soul all the rottenness that she could see, the impulse to kill herself would be overmastering. Her father had committed suicide. . . .

All afternoon the snow fell steadily, and she stayed indoors and debated how she might best re-create her soul. How she might drive out from her being the demon of self. How she might open her heart to pure, noble and unselfish motives. How she might rid herself of insane jealousies. How she might become less conceited, less the egoist. How she might build up in herself a real personality, strong, simple and generous, something which would make life worth the living, even if all other things were taken away. And how (God forgive her for thinking this !)—how she might make herself more acceptable to Verreker, more worthy in his eyes, more valued in his esteem. It meant tearing herself to pieces. She declared that he had hurt her more than she had ever been hurt before. It was so. She was hurting all over from his words to her. But the surgical operation on her own soul would cost her more still. The pain of it would be all the harder to bear because it would be self-inflicted. She must stamp out ruthlessly what was nine-tenths of her. . . . And then beyond all the pain, in the sweet aftercalm, her soul would be clean and passionately free. . . .

That night she was playing at a concert in town. She played badly, and as she left the platform she realized the fight that was in store for her. Among the few things left which she dared to treasure was her ambition as a pianist. It might be selfish and conceited, but she felt that it was at any rate one of the most worthy parts of her. And she

saw that, come what might, she must not lower her standard in that direction. Her fight to be a great pianist must be linked up with her spiritual struggle for the cleansing of her soul. She went home resolved that she would practise harder and more rigorously than ever. . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

DÉBÂCLE

§ 1

THE next morning she awoke with a bad headache. Her hands and wrists were very hot, and when she tried to get out of bed her feet were curiously vagrant and unstable. So she got back to bed and summoned Florrie, her maid. Florrie was a country girl, large and buxom and pleasure-loving. Catherine had got her by advertising in an Essex local paper, a method which had been recommended to her as one by which excellent servants are frequently picked up. So Florrie had left the little village near Chelmsford and had taken up her abode in "Elm Cottage." The joys of the town fascinated her. In less than three weeks she was "walking out" with a tram conductor. When Catherine was out at evening concerts she used frequently to allow Florrie the evenings off, and gradually Florrie came to regard these not as a privilege, but as a right. She had a huge appetite and a habit of reading sixpenny novelettes. There was no personal affection between mistress and servant, though that was not altogether the fault of the latter.

Florrie's appearance at nine o'clock in the morning was aggressive. It was not her business to get her mistress out of bed and dress her: she was a housemaid. She regarded distrustfully Catherine's announcement that she was not feeling very well, that she would not get up just yet, and that Florrie could bring the breakfast upstairs to her. She obeyed truculently. The tray of breakfast pots was placed on a chair by the side of her bed.

"There's not enough milk, I think," said Catherine, looking into the cream jug; "you'd better fetch a drop more."

Florrie sniffed. "There ain't no more meulk in the 'ouse, mum," she replied steadfastly.

"Why not?"

"'Cos there ain't, mum."

Catherine raised herself sideways on her elbow, the better to pursue the argument.

"Did the milkman leave a pint as usual?"

"Yes, mum."

"And this is all that's left of it?"

"Yes, mum."

"Then you must have used far too much with your porridge. . . . Well, since there isn't enough, you'd better go to a shop and get another pint."

Florrie fidgeted uneasily with her feet. She was not used to her mistress in such a firm mood.

"It's a long way, mum. . . . There's no plice nearer than Brigson's, daown the 'Igh Road. All daown the 'ill an' up agin, mum."

"Never mind. Go to Brigson's."

"Naow, mum?"

"Yes, this minute."

"The milkman'll be here again in 'alf an hour, mum."

Catherine flushed with anger.

"Are you going to go to Brigson's or not?"

Florrie raised her eyebrows self-questioningly.

"S'powsing I waster say not, mum?" she said impudently.

The retort stung Catherine to feverish decision.

"You can either go to Brigson's or take a week's notice," she cried shrilly, and let go the elbow that supported her head. Her red hair straggled across the pillow, half hiding her face and effectively preventing Florrie from seeing that she was weeping. Florrie was not hard-hearted, and if she had seen her mistress's tears she would probably have apologized. But she did not see them: she saw only the red flush on her cheeks and the angry glint in her eyes. She saw that it was a direct contest of wills, and also, which perhaps was the deciding factor, she did not wish to leave Upton Rising and her tram conductor. So she left the

room sullenly, put on her hat in front of the dining-room overmantel downstairs, and took the path through the snow towards the High Road.

And meanwhile Catherine lay weeping upstairs. . . . Florrie's open defiance seemed one more link in the chain of evidence that proved her to be unworthy of respect, devotion or love. Even Florrie despised her: Florrie, with her mule-like doggedness and inferior intellect, judged herself competent to query her mistress's orders, and treat her with what was very thinly veiled contempt. . . .

The morning paper was on the breakfast tray, and she raised herself again and glanced at the headlines. Then she turned to the inside page where the musical criticisms and announcements, if any, were inserted. Under the heading, "New Year's Concert," she read:

Miss Weston's performance was curiously disappointing. I was confirmed in the opinion I have held ever since I first heard Miss Weston, that she is a skilful player of considerable talent who will, however, never reach the front rank of her profession. Some cardinal defects in her technique and interpretation showed themselves with disconcerting frankness last evening. On the whole, had I not known that Miss Weston at her best is quite skilful in her playing of Chopin and Listz, I should have wondered last evening what had led the organizers of the concert to include her in a programme which included such names as Signor ——, the tenor, and Mme. ——, the prima donna. She played a Chopin polonaise as if it were a cake-walk, and her Liszt's Sposalizio was not even note-perfect. Perhaps Miss Weston was feeling unwell, in which case it would be unfair to criticize her too severely, but the truth is, in twenty years' musical experience I have never heard such poor playing at a concert purporting to be first-rate. . . .

The article was signed by one of London's chief musical critics. . . .

Catherine dropped the newspaper on to the floor with the remainder of the criticism unread. She did not even know if that was the worst that was printed about her. The writer was a man for whom she had a great respect: he had never been among the enthusiasts who prophesied for her a world-wide reputation, yet till now his criticisms had always been mildly encouraging, particularly when it

was borne in mind that his newspaper, a journal of independent views, permitted him to be mercilessly sarcastic at the expense of all musical aspirants whom he thought to be aiming too high. And now he had turned against her. It was all the harder to bear because he had not employed sarcasm: there was throughout his criticism a kind of sorrowful kindness, as if he sincerely pitied her.

When she thought that Verreker might read the article (would, in fact, in all probability) she felt ashamed, disgraced. Then, as she realized that a few more criticisms of that kind from the leading critics would damn her reputation, lose her her engagements and fling her back into the common rut, she was overwhelmed with the horror that the future might hold for her. She tossed and fretted in an agony of shame and mortification, cursing blindly at the ill-luck that was falling upon her on all sides. At last, unable to bear the torture of her thoughts any longer, she sprang out of bed with the zest of a tiger and put on a dressing-gown. She did not notice the difficulty she was having to stand upright: she had tapped hidden sources of energy within her which, though not extensive, were sufficient to sustain her for the present. She opened the door and went on to the landing. It was terribly cold there: the open fanlight window let in an icy draught from the north. Her feet were bare, but she did not appear to notice it on the thick stair-carpet. She began to descend, holding on to the stair-rail tightly. At the foot she stood still for a minute, as if waiting for supplies of energy, and then walked into the drawing-room. The fire, lit apparently with damp wood picked up from the Forest, had gone out and the room was very chilly. She walked unerringly to the music-cabinet and, kneeling on the floor, began to search in feverish haste. At last, seemingly, she discovered the object of her quest, a single thin piece of music in a yellow paper cover. With a strangely difficult movement she rose to her feet again and half walked, half staggered the short intervening distance to the piano-stool. It took her quite a minute to open out the music at the first page and place it in front of her on the rest. Instinctively she placed

her bare feet on the cold brass of the pedals, and drew them away as quickly as if the metal had been white-hot. The shock restored to her a part of her lost energy. She began to move her fingers desultorily over the keys. At first the music was simple and she managed pretty well. But on the third page it developed octave arpeggio eccentricities in the left hand, and against these the fury of her determination burst in vain. She was handicapped, too, by not having the use of the pedals. For several moments her fingers moved, struggling vainly against chords and runs which her eyes could scarcely read and her memory but vaguely suggest. A terrible battle it was—a truly Homeric contest: her own tigerish determination against all the difficulties that a master-technician could invent. . . . But you would never have guessed that it was Liszt's Sposalizio. . . .

On the fourth page her spirit broke, and she fell forward sobbing, with her head and hair on the keys. And there some moments later, Florrie, entering with a jug of milk in her hand, found her, still sobbing uncontrollably. . . .

§ 2

Florrie, now thoroughly alarmed, and sincerely anxious to make amends for her previous truculence, got her back to bed somehow and sent for a doctor. Dr. McPherson motored from Bockley to see her, and found her temperature somewhat dangerously high. From Florrie he learned how Catherine had come in the day before, after half-wading through the snow and slush from the tram terminus. She had caught a chill. Knowing that she was something of a celebrity and in receipt of a considerable salary, he did not tell her how her own foolishness had been the cause of it. He announced his intention of sending a nurse to look after her, left detailed instructions with Florrie as to how to act until the nurse came, and said that he would himself come again later in the evening. Downstairs Florrie told him how she had found her mistress in the drawing-room, sobbing in front of the piano.

"Yes, yes," he muttered impatiently, "of course—that

is all what one might expect. . . . You should not have left her. . . ."

And he drove off in his car down the winding gravel lane that led to the High Road. Florrie was offended. After all, it was through obeying her mistress that she had been compelled to leave her. She was aware that she was being treated unjustly, and it gave her an air of conscious martyrdom. . . .

She went back to Catherine's bedroom. The breakfast things, untouched and forgotten, had to be cleared away. The coffee was nearly cold, but she warmed it up on the gas ring in the kitchen and drank it herself. Some of the cold and leathery buttered toast she ate herself; the rest she threw into the snow-covered garden for the birds. . . . Every time she passed the bed she glanced pityingly at the huddled figure and the mass of flame-coloured hair that straggled over the pillow. Her expression said plainly enough: I have been ill-treated and misunderstood, but I bear no malice. You shall see what an unselfish creature I am. . . . And another of her reflections was expressed some time later when she was talking to Minnie Walker, one of the barmaids at the High Wood Hotel. "She 'as got nice 'air," she told Minnie. "Pity 'er fice ain't so nice . . . but I wish I got 'er 'air, I do, reely. . . ."

Morning passed into afternoon, and nothing altered in the view from the bedroom window of "Elm Cottage." The sky was still uniformly grey, the trees like black and white etchings, the lawn in the front garden a patch of dazzling white, broken only by the double track of a bird's footmarks. A fire was burning in the fireplace, and as the heat rose to the roof the snow above began to thaw and slide down off the gutters like a thunderous avalanche. In time the lawn was littered with the falling spray of these successive cataclysms, and the steady drip, drip of the gutters showed that what had not fallen was thawing fast. . . . The flames on the top of the red coal fluttered idly like blue wings when the wind swept down the chimney: something reminded Catherine of those distant childhood days of hers in Kitchener Road, when she had watched

the flames on long winter evenings and listened to them as they said: Lappappappap. . . . They were saying it now in odd moments and their voices linked her to the scenes and incidents of her childhood. . . . Florrie was rocking herself in a chair by the fire and reading a paper-backed novel by Charles Garvice. There was another paper-backed novel by Charles Garvice on the floor beside her. She had a great red face and large eyes. Occasionally as she read her mouth would open and remain so for moments at a time. She skipped a good deal of the descriptive matter. Every few minutes she yawned noisily and drew herself a little closer to the fire. The clock downstairs struck three. . . . Far away Catherine could hear the purr of trams along the High Road. The room began to darken. At first she thought it was getting night-time, but she realized that it was scarcely the hour for that. Then she looked at the window. The window was dirty: she could scarcely see the trees of the Forest at all. She stared hard at the window. . . . No: it was not dirt. She could see what it was now: it had started snowing again. The dark outline of the Forest was only vaguely grey behind the slanting flakes, and as she listened she could hear it swishing —softly—all around and about her—on the roof, on the window-sill, on the lawn beneath, over all the miles of trees and grassland, swishing like a soft brush, yet loudly enough to deaden the sound of the trams on the High Road. And he had said: "I expect there will be some more skating to-night if it doesn't snow." But it was snowing now. There would be no skating. It *did* seem a pity. So many people would be disappointed. . . .

Then a film passed over her eyes, and when it lifted the blind was drawn in front of the window and one of the electric lights by the fireplace was glowing. . . . There was a different person in the room with her: a thin, red-lipped, white-faced woman in nurse's uniform: she also was rocking herself in front of the fire, and reading a paper-backed novel by Charles Garvice. Catherine watched her for a long while, and she did not move save to turn over the pages. She had brown hair and a mole on her right

cheek. She was wearing Catherine's bedroom slippers. That curiously trivial thing annoyed Catherine intensely.

All at once Catherine reached out a hand from beneath the clothes and pressed the electric light switch that dangled above the pillow. Three clusters of light in various parts of the room burst into yellow brilliance. The nurse started violently, put down her book and approached the bedside.

"Good evening . . ." she began softly, and pressed back the switch so that the lights disappeared.

Catherine felt herself burning with suppressed fury. What right had this strange woman to turn out the lights if *she* wished them to be lit? What right had she? Who was mistress in her own house? With trembling fingers she reached again for the switch and pressed it. The lights reappeared. She kept her fingers tightly clasped round the switch. But a cold hand laid itself on the top of hers and she had to leave go. Then she saw the nurse take the switch and hang it over the top of a picture far out of anybody's reach, unless a chair were used to stand on. . . .

She lay there on the bed, panting with indignation. She had been insulted, deliberately, calculatingly, and in her own house. . . . And the nurse went back to the fireplace and resumed the paper-backed novel by Charles Garvice. . . .

§ 3

Dr. McPherson was standing beneath the single electric globe that was in use. Beside him, on a level with his shoulder, stood the nurse. In his hand he held a portion of newspaper, crumpled and partially torn.

He said: "H'm, yes. Very possibly. . . . Are you certain she read it?"

The nurse said: "I think she must have done. It was lying on the floor as if she had thrown it down. . . ."

And the doctor's voice boomed back: "H'm, yes. Very pathetic. . . . But of course her illness accounts for her bad performance. She ought to have realized that. . . ."

Catherine's heart gave a sudden leap. Of course! That

was it! Why had she not thought of that before? She was *ill*. That accounted for her bad playing, the nurse, the doctor, everything. . . . When she recovered she would be able to play again all right! Of course! What a fool she had been! This was only illness . . . illness. She began to cry for joy at this new hope that had sprung up in her heart. . . .

§ 4

Somebody (it looked like her father) was saying: "—if you want friends, let them be girl friends. . . . Surely you can find plenty of your own sex without——"

"—I can't think what you want playing about with boys. . . . Girls should stick to girls. . . ."

And he pulled off his boots and flung them loudly under the sofa. . . . Hr-rooch—flop . . . Hr-rooch—flop . . . and then his collar—plock, plock. . . .

"A girl of your age," he went on, "ought not to bother her head with fellers . . . this sort of free-and-easy-carrying-on won't do, Catherine. . . ."

And—"I can't see what you need ever to be out later than nine for . . . you've got all the daytime. I can't think what you want the night as well for . . . it's not as if you weren't allowed to do what you like on Saturday afternoons. . . ."

And her mother, shrill and cacophonous:

"When *I* was young——"

Chorus of father and mother: "When *I* was young——"

§ 5

It must be a dream.

If she ever had children of her own, would she say to them: "When *I* was young——"

She pondered. . . .

CHAPTER XIX

AFTERWARDS

§ 1

UNFORTUNATELY her illness, whilst not serious in itself, left her with neuritis in her right arm. Until she should be rid of this, any restarting of concert work was out of the question. To play even a hymn tune with her right hand fatigued her, and all scale and arpeggio work was physically impossible. When she was quite recovered from all save the neuritis, she spent most of her time either reading or practising the left-hand parts of various concert pieces. This latter exercise, whilst not very entertaining to her in the musical sense, consoled her with the thought that her time was not being entirely wasted, and that when her right hand should come into use again her playing would be all the better for this intensive development of her left. Every day she visited a masseuse in the West-end and received an electric treatment for her arm which Dr. McPherson recommended.

Money began to be somewhat of a difficulty with her. Thinking always that her future was rosy with prospects and that her salary would be sure to keep constantly increasing, she had never troubled to save much, and had, indeed, been living slightly above her income ever since she came to "Elm Cottage." She paid twenty-five shillings a week rent, seven and sixpence a week to Florrie, besides a weekly half-crown to a visiting gardener and a charwoman. She had heaps of incidental expenses—periodic tuning of the piano—her season ticket to town—heavy bills for music, dresses and furniture (which she was constantly buying)—her quarterly payment to the press-cutting agency—books, magazines, expensive laundrying, a fastidious taste in food

and restaurants, all added to make her expenditure a few shillings—sometimes a few pounds—per month in excess of her income. During her illness, her income had been nil and her expenses enormous. The nurse wanted two guineas a week, Dr. McPherson's bills were notoriously high, and in the case of a person like Catherine he would probably charge more than usual. Five shillings a visit was his fee, and for a fortnight he had come twice a day, and for the last three weeks once. The West-end masseuse was even more exorbitant: her fees were half a guinea for each electric treatment lasting about half an hour. Household expenses were becoming terrific. The nurse seemed to think that Catherine was a person of infinite financial resources: she ordered from the grocer, the butcher, the poulterer and the fruiterer whatever she had a fancy to, in or out of season, regardless of expense. She and Catherine took their meals together, and Catherine's appetite was never more than half that of the nurse. So the weeks passed and the bills of the tradesmen went piling up and Catherine's cheque account at the bank came tumbling down.

One morning the bill from Parker's, provision merchant, High Street, Bockley, arrived by post. Catherine had expected a heavy sum to pay, but the account presented to her was absolutely staggering. It was for nineteen pounds five and fourpence. As Catherine looked at it she went quite white with panic. She dared not examine carefully every item—she was afraid to see her own extravagance written down. But as her eye swept curiously down the bill it caught sight of such things as: Port wine, half dozen, forty-two shillings; pair of cooked chickens, eight and six; two pounds of black grapes (out of season), fifteen shillings. . . . The bill took away all Catherine's appetite for breakfast. From the writing-bureau she took out her bank pass-book: it showed that she had fifty-three pounds four and nine on her cheque account, and nothing on her deposit side. The situation became ominous. Out of that fifty-three pounds would have to be paid the grocer's bill of nineteen pounds odd, the bills not yet forthcoming

of the fruiterer, fishmonger, poulterer, butcher, confectioner, and dairyman (cream had been a heavy item in her diet). Plus this, small bills from the bookseller, newsagent, tobacconist and laundryman. Plus this, whatever Dr. McPherson had in store for her. Plus this, Madame Varegny, masseuse—*her* bill of costs. In March, too, would come the bill from the press-cutting agency, the piano-tuner, and the renewal of her season ticket. . . . All out of fifty-three pounds! Was it possible? . . . And, of course, rent and wages to Florrie. . . . Things were evidently fast approaching a financial crisis.

One thing was absolutely clear: she must economize drastically and immediately. And one of the first steps in that direction was to get rid of the nurse and the doctor. Except for the neuritis in her arm she was really quite well now, and both nurse and doctor were completely unnecessary. But it required a tremendous effort to tell them their services were no longer required. Her illness seemed to have sapped her will power. The truth was (though she would never have admitted it) she was afraid of both the doctor and the nurse. Only her greater fear of the avalanche of the bills that was threatening her gave her a sort of nervous determination.

When Dr. McPherson came in his car at ten o'clock that morning her heart was beating wildly. She wondered even then if her courage would be equal to the task.

"Good morning," he announced genially, walking briskly into the breakfast-room, "and how are we this morning? Getting along famously, eh?"

"About the same," she replied dully.

"Like the massage?"

"Fairly. I can't feel it doing me any good, though."

"Oh, you haven't been having it long enough yet. We'll soon set you up again, you wait. . . . After all, you're young. You've the best part of life before you. An old lady of seventy I visited yesterday said if she were only——"

"Doctor!" Her voice was trying to be firm.

"Yes?"

"I want you to stop visiting me." (The thing was done!)

"But—my dear young lady—why ever——?"

"Because I am getting very short of money, and I shall have to economize. I really can't afford to keep having you visiting me every day."

"Well—of course—h'm—if you wish—I suppose. But you aren't well yet. I shall, at any rate, with your permission call occasionally not as a doctor, but as a visitor. I am very deeply interested in your recovery."

"It is very kind of you. . . . And one other thing: I want you to tell the nurse to go also. I really don't need her any longer. Perhaps, since you brought her here, you wouldn't mind——"

"Certainly, if you desire it. I'll tell her when she comes to the surgery for the medicine this afternoon."

"Thank you ever so much."

"You'll continue with massage treatment?"

"Yes—for the present, at any rate."

"Good . . . you'll begin to feel the effects of it in a day or two. . . . The weather is enough to keep anybody with neuritis. Simply rain, rain, rain from morning till night. Shocking for colds and influenza. I have over thirty cases of influenza. Twenty of them are round about High Wood. It must be the Forest, I think, everything so damp and sodden. . . ."

§ 2

The nurse went the following morning. Before going by one of the early trains from Upton Rising she cooked herself a sumptuous breakfast of ham and eggs, fish and coffee. She was going to her home in Newcastle, and she took with her for refreshments on the journey several hardboiled eggs, a bottle of invalid's wine, and two packages of chicken sandwiches. Coming up to Catherine's bedroom just before departure she shook hands very stiffly and wished her a swift recovery. But her attitude was contemptuous.

After she had gone, Catherine called Florrie up to her and delivered a sort of informal speech.

"You know, Florrie, that lately, while I've been ill, expenses have been very high. And of course I haven't had any money coming in at all. Well, I haven't got enough money to keep us spending at the rate I have been, so I've had to cut down expenses drastically. The nurse has gone for good and the doctor isn't going to call so often. . . . You must be careful not to waste anything. Don't order from the grocer's anything that isn't necessary. You'd better let me see the order before you give it. . . . No fruits out of season . . . we needn't have meat *every* day, you know . . . and tell the gardener he needn't come again until further notice. There's not much gardening to be done this time of the year. . . ."

§ 3

A few days later came more bills.

Brigson's, dairyman, High Road, Bockley, £4 0s. 3d.

Mattocks', poulterer, The Causeway, Upton Rising, £8 9s. 0d.

Ratcliffe and Jones, confectioners, High Street, Bockley, £3 12s. 5d.

Thomas and Son, fruiterers, The Ridgeway, Upton Rising, £7 4s. 3d.

Hackworth, newsagents, High Wood, £2 0s. 8d.

Dr. McPherson, St. Luke's Grove, Bockley, for services . . . £15 12s. 0d.

Total, £40 18s. 6d.!

Plus Parker's bill, £60 3s. 10d.!

And she had £53 4s. 9d. to pay it with!

And there were yet a few more bills to come in!

And expenditure was still continuing, and no sign of being able to start earning again!

Madame Varegny was costing money at the rate of three guineas a week. There was not even fifty-three pounds four and nine in the bank, for Catherine had drawn out ten pounds for pocket money and half of that had gone on small expenses. She was faced with a problem. There was bound to be a big deficit on her balance-sheet. . . . When the first shock

of the situation passed away she became quite cool and calculating.

She wrote cheques in payment of Parker's, Mattocks', Ratcliffe and Jones', Thomas and Sons', and Brigson's bills. For they were shops at which she was forced to continue dealing, and which would have refused her credit if she had not settled promptly.

McPherson, she decided, could wait awhile. . . .

On the bill of Hackworth, newsagents, she noticed items for books which she had never ordered. She enquired at the shop one day and was shown the detailed list. It included some score paper-backed volumes by Charles Garvice.

" But I never ordered these ! " Catherine protested.

Mr. Hackworth shrugged his shoulders.

" You've 'ad 'em, anyway, miss. The nurse uster come in of a morning and say : Mr. Hackworth, I want the *Moosical Times* for this month——"

" Yes, I know about that : I *did* order that——"

" Well, an' then the nurse'd say afterwards : I want them books on this list, an' she giv' me a bit o' piper with 'em written down on. . . . Put 'em all down on the sime acahnt ? I uster arst, an' she uster sy : Yes, you'd better. . . ."

Catherine was more angry over this than over anything else.

At home in the kitchen she discovered Florrie reading one of these paper-backed novels.

" Where did this come from ? " she enquired sternly.

" Out of the bottom cupboard," replied Florrie, conscious of innocence ; " there's piles of 'em there. The nurse left 'em."

Sure enough the bottom cupboard was littered with them. Their titles ran the entire gamut both of chromatic biliousness and female nomenclature. Catherine stirred them with her foot as if they had been carrion.

" Look here, Florrie," she said authoritatively. " Get rid of all this trash. . . . There's a stall in Duke Street on a Friday night where they buy this sort of thing second-hand. Take them down there next Friday and sell them."

Florrie nodded submissively.

"Yes, mum, I will . . . only . . . I've read 'em neely all, only there's jest a few I ain't read yet; p'raps if I sowld the others I might keep 'em by till I'd finished reading of 'em . . . wouldn't take me long, mum!"

Catherine half smiled.

"I can't think why you like reading them at all."

Florrie looked critically at the volume in her hand.

"Well, mum, they ain't *bad*."

"And do you really enjoy them?"

"Not all of 'em, mum . . . but some of 'em: well, mum, they ain't at all *bad*. . . ."

§ 4

Fourteen of the paper-backed novels on the following Friday night fetched one and six at the stall in Duke Street. Florrie's tram fare both ways, fourpence. Net receipts, one and twopence. . . .

An unexpected bill came in, £1 10s. 0d. for coal.

When Catherine went to the bank to draw five pounds (by means of a cheque made payable to herself) the clerk said: "By the way, miss, your cheque account is getting low. . . . Excuse me mentioning it, but we prefer you not to let it get too low. . . . Say fifty pounds . . . of course, for a while . . . but as soon as you can conveniently . . . you'll excuse me mentioning it. . . ."

Catherine replied: "Of course, I hadn't thought about that. I'll put some more in shortly. Thanks for letting me know."

But it sent her into a fever of anxiety.

How was she to get any money to put in?

One afternoon she was strolling about the garden when, approaching the kitchen window, she heard voices. It was Florrie talking to Minnie Walker, the barmaid at the High Wood Hotel. Catherine did not like Minnie Walker coming to see Florrie so often, particularly when they drank beer in the kitchen together. She listened to see whether Minnie had come to deliver any particular message or merely to have a drink and a chat and to waste Florrie's time. If

the latter, Catherine meant to interfere and tell Minnie to go.

The conversation she overheard was as follows:

MINNIE. I s'pouse the food ain't so good now the nurse 'as gone. She wasn't arf a beauty, eh?

FLORRIE. She knew 'ow ter set a tible, anyway. Chicken every night, I uster git. She had the breast, an' uster leave me the legs. But the old girl don't do that now. Can't afford to. Fact is, the nurse run up some pretty big bills for 'er. She can't py 'em all, I don't think.

MINNIE. Then she *is* owing a good deal, eh?

FLORRIE. I dessay. Corsts 'er ten and six a time fer this messidge treatment wot she 'as evry dy. I know that 'cos the nurse said so.

MINNIE. Yer wanter look out she pys you prompt. 'Case she goes bankrupt.

FLORRIE. You bet I tike care o' myself. Wait till she don't giv me my money of a Friday and I'll tell her strite.

Catherine turned away burning with rage.

That night when Florrie came up to lay the tea, Catherine said: "By the way, Florrie, I give you a week's notice from to-night."

"Why, mum?"

"Because I don't wish to have anybody in the house who discusses my private business with outsiders."

"But, mum, I never——"

"Don't argue. I overheard your conversation. I don't want any explanations."

"Well, mum, they do say that listeners never 'ear no good of themselves, so if you will go key-'olin' round——"

"Please leave the room. I don't wish to talk to you."

"Very well, mum. It it suits you, it suits me, 'm sure. It won't be no 'ard job for me ter git another plice——"

"I have told you to go."

"I'm goin'. By the way, there's two letters wot come at dinner-time."

"Bring them up, then."

"Yes, mum."

A moment later she returned carrying on a tray two unsealed envelopes with halfpenny stamps. From the

half-malignant, half-triumphant look in her eyes, Catherine was almost sure she had examined their contents.

After Florrie had gone, Catherine opened them.

More bills!

Peach and Lathergrew, butchers, High Road, Bockley, £6 16s. 2d.

Batty, fish merchant, The Causeway, Upton Rising, £5 5s. 10d.

The crisis was coming nearer!

§ 5

The persistent piling up of disaster upon disaster inflicted on her a kind of spiritual numbness, which made her for the most part insensible to panic. The first bill (the one from the grocer's) had had a much more disturbing effect on her than any subsequent one or even than the cumulative effect of all of them when she thought about her worries *en masse*.

There came a time when by constant pondering the idea of being hopelessly in debt struck her as a very inadequate reason for unhappiness. But at odd moments, as blow after blow fell, and as she slipped insensibly into a new stratum of society, there would come moments of supreme depression, when there seemed nothing in the world to continue to live for, and when the whole of her past life and future prospects seemed nothing but heaped-up agony. Her dreams mocked her with the romance of her subconsciousness. She would dream that she was the greatest pianist in the world, that the mightiest men and women of a hundred realms had gathered in one huge building to taste the magic of her fingers, that they cheered and applauded whilst she played things of appalling technical difficulty until she had perforce to stop because her instrument could no longer be heard above the frenzy of their shouting; that in the end she finished her repertoire of difficult concert pieces, and in response to repeated demands for an encore started to play a simple minuet of Beethoven, and that at the simple beauty of the opening chords the great assembly hushed its voice and remained tense and in

perfect silence whilst she played. And, moreover, that her quick eye had noticed in a far and humble corner of the building Ray Verreker, straining to catch the music of the woman whose fingers he had guided to fame. He was in rags and tatters, and it was plain that fortune had played despicably with him. But, amidst the thunderous applause that shook the building when her fingers had come to rest, her eye caught his and she beckoned to him to approach. He came, and she held out both her magic hands to raise him to the platform. "This is my master," she cried, in a voice that lifted the furthest echoes, "this is my teacher, the one whose creature I am, breath of my body, fire of my spirit! The honour you heap upon me I share with him!"

Beautifully unreal were those dreams of hers. Always was she the heroine and Verreker the hero. Always were their present positions reversed, she, famous and wealthy and adored, and he, alone, uncared for, helpless and in poverty, unknown and loving her passionately. Always her action was the opposite of what his was in reality: she was his kind angel, stooping to his fallen fortunes, and lifting them and him by her own bounty. . . .

Beautiful, unreal dreams! During the day she had no time for these wandering fictions: work and worry kept her mind constantly in the realm of stern reality; but at night-time, when her determination held no longer sway, she sketched her future according to her heart's desire and filled it in with touches of passionate romance. To wake from these scenes of her own imagining into the drab reality of her morning's work was fraught with horror unutterable. . . .

Worst, perhaps, of all, her arm did not improve. It seemed as if the three guineas' worth per week of electric massage treatment were having simply no effect at all, save to bring nearer the day of financial cataclysm. And even if her neuritis were now to leave her, the long period during which she had had no practice would have left unfortunate results. Even granted complete and immediate recovery, it would be fully a month, spent in laborious and

intensive practising, before she dare play again in public. Then, too, it would be necessary for her to play brilliantly to retrieve the reputation tarnished by her performance at the New Year's concert. Moreover, she had no organizer now, and she did not know quite what the work entailed by that position was. And she felt nervous of playing again, lest she might further damage her reputation.

But as long as she could not use her right arm these difficulties were still hidden in the future.

Bills began to pour in by every post. Possibly Minnie Walker had used her unrivalled position for disseminating gossip to spread rumours of Catherine's financial difficulties. At any rate, from the saloon-bar of the High Wood Hotel the tale blew Bockleywards with marvellous rapidity, and caused every tradesman with whom Catherine had an account to send in his bill for immediate payment. There were bills from shops that Catherine had forgotten all about. Photographers, picture-framers, dyers and cleaners, leather-goods fanciers, all contributed their quota to the gathering avalanche of ruin. When every conceivable bill had arrived and had been added to the rest, the deficit on the whole was over a hundred and twenty pounds. This included a bill of over thirty pounds from a West-end dressmaker's. Catherine had got past the point when this appalling situation could have power to frighten her. She just gathered all the unpaid bills into one small drawer of her bureau, rigidly economized in all housekeeping expenses, and looked around the house for things she did not want and could sell for a good figure.

There was the large cheval glass in her bedroom. It was curious that she should think first of this. It was one of a large quantity of toilet furniture that she had bought when she first came to "Elm Cottage." It was a beautiful thing, exquisitely bevelled and lacquered, and framed in carved ebony, She had liked it because she could stand in front of it in evening dress and criticise the whole poise and pose of herself. She had been accustomed to let down her hair in front of it at night and admire the red lustre reflected in the glass. Hours she must have spent

posing in front of it. And yet now, when she contemplated selling, this was the first thing she thought of. . . . Curious ! . . . The fact was, she was getting old. Or so she felt and thought. Her hair was becoming dull and opaque ; there were hard lines about her eyes and forehead. Never beautiful, she was now losing even that strange magnetic attractiveness which before had sufficed for beauty. So the cheval glass which reminded her of it could go. . . .

She called at Trussall's, the second-hand dealers in the Bockley High Road, and told them about it. They offered to send up a man to inspect it and make an offer. Catherine, too, thought this would be the best plan. When she arrived back at " Elm Cottage " she diligently polished the ebony frame and rubbed the mirror till it seemed the loveliest thing in the room. She even rearranged the other furniture so that the cheval glass should occupy the position of honour.

The man came—a gaunt little snap-voiced man in a trilby hat. Did he fail to notice how the lawn was growing lank and weedy, the flower-beds covered with long grass, the trellis work on the pergola rotting and fallen ?

He tapped the mirror in a business-like fashion with his nail and examined cursorily the carving.

" H'm," he said meditatively. " We'll offer you five pounds for it."

Catherine flushed with shame.

" Why," she cried shrilly, " I paid forty guineas for it, and it was priced at more than that ! "

He coughed deprecatingly.

" I'm afraid we couldn't go beyond five, ma'am." If he had not been slightly impressed by the vehemence of her protest he would have added : " Take it or leave it ! "

" Come downstairs," she commanded, " I want you to value a few things for me."

The fact was that she was prepared to be ironically entertained by the niggardly sums he offered. She brought him to the piano.

" Here," she said, " a Steinway baby grand, splendid

tone, good as new, fine rosewood frame ; what'll you offer for that ? "

He thumped the chord of A major.

" Sixty," he replied.

" Sixty what ? "

" Pounds . . . might go to guineas."

" Look here, do you know I paid a hundred and twenty guineas less than twelve months ago for it ? "

" All I know, ma'am, is it ain't worth more than sixty to me."

" But it's practically new ! "

" That don't alter the fact that it's really second-hand. There's no market for this sort of thing. Second-hand uprights, maybe, but not these things. Besides, it ain't a partic'lar good tone."

" I tell you it's a lovely tone. Wants tuning a bit, that's all. D'you think you know more about pianos than I do ? "

" Can't say, ma'am, whether I do or I don't."

" Do you ever go to London concerts ? "

" No time for it, ma'am."

" Have you ever heard of Catherine Weston ? "

" The name ain't familiar to me. What about 'er ? "

Catherine paused as if to recover from a blow, and continued more calmly : " She said this piano had a lovely tone. She played at the Albert Hall."

The man ground his heel into the carpet.

" Well, ma'am," he replied, " if Miss Catherine Weston thinks this piano is worth more than sixty pounds you'd better ask her to buy it off of you. All I'm saying is this, it ain't worth no more to me than what I offered. Sixty pounds, I said : I dunno even if I'd go to sixty guineas. Take it or leave it for sixty pounds. That's my rule in this business. Mike an offer and never go back on it, an' never go no further on it. That's what I calls fair business. If you think that you can get more'n sixty anywhere else you can try. I ain't arskin' you to let me 'ave it. Reely, I dunno that I want it. I might 'ave it takin' up ware'ouse room for months on end. . . . But of course if you was to come back to me after trying other places I couldn't

offer you no more'n fifty-five—guineas, maybe. Wouldn't be fair to myself, in a kind of manner. . . . Sixty—look 'ere, I'll be generous and say guineas—sixty guineas if you'll sell it now—cash down, mind! If not——"

She laughed.

"I've really no intention of selling at all," she broke in, half hysterically, "I only wanted a valuation."

"Oh! I see," he replied, taken aback. "Then wot about the glarss upstairs, eh? Five pounds is wot I said."

"Make it guineas," she said firmly.

"Pounds, ma'am."

"Five guineas," she cried shrilly, "or I shan't sell it."

The bargain demon had seized hold of her.

"It ain't worth more'n pounds to me."

"Then I'll keep it. . . . Good afternoon."

She turned to the door. He shuffled and sat down on the piano-stool.

"Well, ma'am, I'll say guineas, then, as a favour to you. Only you're drivin' a hard bargain with me. . . . Do you agree to guineas?"

"Yes . . . I'll take five guineas for it . . . cash down."

"The man'll pay you when he comes to fetch it, ma'am."

"I thought you said cash down."

"Well, and ain't that cash down enough for you? Wot do you expect? . . . I'll send the man down in a couple of hours."

"All right, then . . . good afternoon."

At the door he said:

"By the way, ma'am, I'll keep that offer of sixty guineas for the piano open for a few days . . . so that if . . ."

She replied hastily: "Oh, I'm not going to sell *that*."

"Very well, ma'am . . . only I'll give sixty for it if you should want to get rid of it."

Then she came back to the piano and looked at it, and did not know whether to laugh or to cry.

§ 6

That evening the man came to fetch the cheval glass. He gave her five sovereigns and two half-crowns. Though

she knew that the glass was worth double and treble what she was receiving for it, she was immensely pleased by that five shillings which she had extracted solely by her own bargaining. . . . The rent-man called that night and nearly all the five guineas vanished in the month's rent. . . . And by the late evening post came a demand note from Jackson's, the photographers, printed on legal-looking blue paper, and informing her that if the bill of seven pounds ten and six were not paid within three days, legal proceedings would be instituted. . . . And it was Jackson's in the old days where she had always met with such unfailing courtesy and consideration, Jackson's where her photograph as an Eisteddfod prize-winner had been taken and exhibited in the front window free of charge. . . .

She called at Trussall's the next morning.

"About that piano," she began.

The man was immediately all attention.

"You wish to sell it, ma'am? . . . Well, my offer's still open."

"Yes, but I want a smaller piano as part exchange. I can't do without a piano of some sort. . . . I want an upright, not such a good one as the other, of course."

"Come into the showrooms," he said, beckoning her to follow.

They wandered up and down long lanes of upright pianos.

"This," he said, striking the chord of A major (always the chord of A major) on one of them—"Beautiful little instrument . . . rich tone . . . upright grand . . . good German make—Stohmenger, Dresden . . . worth forty pounds if it's worth a penny, sell it to you for thirty-five guineas. . . ."

"Can't afford that," she said. "Show me something for about twenty."

"There's this one," he said, rather contemptuously. "Good English make . . . eighteen guineas . . . cheapest we have in the shop. But, of course, you wouldn't want one like that."

She struck a few chords.

" I'll take that . . . and you can send it up and take the other away as soon as you like."

" Very good, ma'am."

When she returned she had a sudden fit of sentimentality as she looked at the Steinway grand. It was a beautiful instrument, black and glossy and wonderfully sleek, like a well-groomed horse. Its raised soundboard reflected her face like a mirror. She sat down on the stool in front of it and tried to play. But her right hand was woefully disorganized. She started a simple minuet of Beethoven, one that she had played as an encore to a Cambridge audience, but the pain in her right hand and arm was so great that she did not go further than the first few bars. Then she tried trick playing with her left hand alone, and when that became uninteresting there was nothing for her to do but to cry. So she cried. . . .

When the furniture van had arrived and a couple of men had carried the beautiful piano into a dark cavity of straw and sackcloth, leaving behind them in exchange a mocking little upstart in streaky imitation fumed oak, not even the presence in her bureau drawer of sixty pounds in notes and gold could compensate her adequately. The new piano looked so cheap and tawdry amongst the surrounding furniture, and the space where the old one had been was drearily vacant and ever remindful of her loss.

The same day she wrote cheques to half a dozen tradesmen, and as she went out to post them, put fifty pounds into her cheque account at the bank. She felt that slowly, at any rate, she was winning in her contest with fortune.

§ 7

Unfortunately the avalanche of bills had not yet quite spent itself, and Madame Varegny suggested an interim payment of her account, amounting to thirty-two treatments at half a guinea each : total sixteen pounds sixteen.

And then one night as Catherine was lying awake in bed, the whole fabric of the future seemed revealed to her. After all, her first steps were inevitable : she would have to leave " Elm Cottage," take a smaller house or go into

lodgings, and sell what furniture she had no room for. It would be better to do that now than to wait until the expensive upkeep of "Elm Cottage" had squandered half her assets. She was so accustomed now to her gradual descent in the social scale that even this prospect, daring and drastic as it was, did not perturb her much. The next day she went round the house, noting the things that she could not possibly take with her if she went into a smaller house or into lodgings. Lodgings she had in mind, because her arm prevented her from doing any but a minimum of housework, and if in lodgings she could pay for any services she required.

She did not go to Trussall's this time to arrange for a valuation of what she desired to sell. For some days before she had been walking along the High Road past Trussall's window, and had had the experience of seeing her own ebony-framed cheval glass occupying a position of honour in the midst of a miscellany of bedroom bric-à-brac. On a card hung on to the carving at the top was the inscription:

Antique model. Splendid Bargain, £19 19s. 6d.

CHAPTER XX

STILL FALLING

§ 1

It was in the first week of April that Catherine began to look about for suitable lodgings. By this time the cottage at High Wood was half-naked of floor coverings: patches on the wallpaper showed where pictures had been wont to hang, and only essential furniture remained. The place was very dreary and inhospitable, and Catherine had many fits of depression during the last two weeks of March, which were bitterly cold and rainy. She was looking forward eagerly to the coming of the warm weather, and with the first of April, which was warm and spring-like, her spirits rose. Rose, that is, merely by comparison with her previous state: ever since her illness a melancholy had settled on her soul which, though it occasionally darkened into deep despair, never broke into even passing radiance.

The sale of her household effects had given her a credit balance of a hundred and ten pounds, and there was still a few pounds' worth of furniture which she was keeping right until the last. Of late her arm had begun to improve somewhat, which made her unwilling to discontinue the massage treatment, though Madame Varegny was very costly. That and the incidental expenses of living would soon eat into her hundred and ten pounds.

Yet on the morning of the first of April she was quite cheerful, relatively. It was as if a tiny ray of sunshine were shyly showing up behind the piles of clouds that had settled shiftless on her soul. The forest trees were just bursting into green leafage; the air warm and comforting; of all seasons this was the most hopeful and the most inspiring. She took a penny tram down to the Ridgeway

Corner, and enjoyed the wind blowing in her face as she sat on the top deck. At the Ridgeway she turned down Hatchet Grove and into the haunts of her earliest days.

The painful memories of her life were associated much more with "Elm Cottage" than with Kitchener Road. Kitchener Road, teeming with memories though it was, could bring her no pain and but mild regrets: the magnitude of more recent happenings took away from it whatever bitterness its memories possessed. She was walking down its concrete sidewalks before she realized where she was, and a certain vague familiarity with the landscape brought her to a standstill in front of the Co-operative Society branch depot. Everything was very little altered. A recent tree-planting crusade had given the road a double row of small and withered-looking copper beeches, each supported by a pole and encased in wire-netting. The Co-operative Society had extended its premises to include what had formerly been a disused workshop, but which now, renovated and changed almost beyond recognition, proclaimed itself to be a "licensed abattoir." Catherine did not know what an abattoir was, but the name sounded curiously inhospitable. She passed by No. 24, and was interested to see that the present occupier, according to a tablet affixed to the side of the porch, was

H. Thicknesse, Plumber and Glazier. Repairs promptly attended to.

The front garden was ambitiously planted with laurels, and the entire exterior of the house showed Mr. Thicknesse to be a man of enterprise.

In the sunshine of an April day Kitchener Road seemed not so tawdry as she had expected, and then she suddenly realized that during the years that she had been away a subtle but incalculably real change had been taking place. Kitchener Road had been slowly and imperceptibly becoming respectable. There was a distinct cæsura where the respectability began: you could tell by the curtains in the windows, the condition of the front gardens, and the occasional tablet on the front gate: "No Hawkers; No Circulars; No Canvassers." What precisely determined the

position of the cæsura was not clear: maybe it was the licensed abattoir, or most probably the cæsura was constantly and uniformly shifting in a given direction. At any rate, the road was immeasurably loftier in the social scale than it had been when she and her parents had occupied No. 24.

Turning into Duke Street, she discovered the Methodist Chapel under process of renovation: scaffolding was up round the walls and the railings in front were already a violent crimson. A notice declared that:

> During the redecorating of the Chapel, services, both morning and evening, will be held in the schoolroom.

It was the schoolroom in which her father had given Band of Hope demonstrations and evenings with the poets; it was the schoolroom in which she had flung a tea-cup at the head of Freddie McKellar. Curiously vivid was the recollection of that early incident. If she had gone inside she could have identified the exact spot on the floor on which she stood to aim the missile. . . . One thing was plain: if Kitchener Road had risen in the social scale its rise had been more than compensated for by a downward movement on the part of Duke Street. Duke Street was, if such were possible, frowsier than ever. Many of the houses had converted their bay-window parlours into shops, and on the window-frame of one of these Catherine noticed the "Apartments" card. She wondered if she would ever have to live in a place like that. It was a greengrocer's shop, and the gutter in front was clogged with cabbage leaves and the outer peelings of onions. The open front door showed a lobby devoid of floor covering, and walls scratched into great fissures of plaster. As she passed by a woman emerged from the shop, with a man's cap adjusted with hat pins, and a dirty grey apron. In her hand she held a gaudily decorated jug, and Catherine saw her cross the road and enter the off-license belonging to the "Duke of Wellington."

§ 2

The summit of disaster was reached when Catherine received one morning in April a bill of eighty-five pounds from a London furniture company! At first she thought it must be a mistake, until she read the list of the specified articles sold to her and identified them as things that had been included amongst a lot that the second-hand dealers had bought from her for twenty-five guineas. It showed the chaotic state of her finances, as well as her complete carelessness in money matters, that she had not the slightest recollection of having incurred the bill. Nor did she recollect having paid for the articles: she had merely overlooked the transaction entirely. And now she must pay eighty-five pounds for a bedroom suite she no longer possessed! The way she had swindled herself irritated her beyond measure. And this time she became seriously alarmed for the future. Twenty-five pounds does not last for long, particularly with electric massage treatment costing three guineas a week. Her excursion to Duke Street had impressed her with the horror of what she might have to come to some day, and now this furniture bill had cut away the few intervening steps that had yet to be descended. She must fall with a bump. It was quite inevitable.

But at first she could not reconcile herself to the new conditions that must be hers for the future. Her dreams of fame as a pianist were still undiminished, and they helped her considerably by suggesting: This débâcle is but a swift excursion: it cannot last for more than a few weeks at the most. Before long I shall be back again, maybe at "Elm Cottage." This adventure is really quite romantic. It should be interesting while it lasts. Nay, it even enhances the strangeness of me that such adventures should come my way. . . . Egoism for once helped her to submit to what, viewed in a sane light, would have been intolerable. Yet in her darker moments the thought would come over her: perhaps I shall never come back. Perhaps I shall never regain the heights I have surrendered. Perhaps this is the end of me. . . .

Only once at this time did she give way to uttermost despair. And that was when a second-hand bookseller bought all her library for five pounds. There were shelves stocked with Wells and Shaw and Ibsen and Galsworthy and Bennett and Hardy and Granville Barker. The whole was worth at least twice what she received for it. But it was not that that made her unhappy. It was the realization that this was her tacit withdrawal from the long struggle to lift herself on to a higher plane. She had tried to educate herself, to stock her mind with wisdom beyond her comprehension, to reconstitute herself in a mould that nature had never intended for her. And there had been times when the struggle, vain and fruitless though it ever was, was a thing of joy to her, of joy even when she was most conscious of failure. But now these books held all her dead dreams, and she cared for them with an aching tenderness. All the things she had tried hard to understand and had never more than half understood were doubly precious now that she was beginning to forget them all. . . . One book alone she kept, and justified her action in so doing on the ground that the dealer would only give her sixpence for it. It was Ray Verreker's *Growth of the Village Community*. It had a good binding, she argued, and it would be a shame to let it go for sixpence. But after all, it was a mere piece of sentimentality that she should keep it. It was no use to her at all. Even in the old days, when a strange enthusiasm had prompted her to seek to make herself mistress of its contents, it had been woefully beyond her understanding. And now, when she tried to re-read its opening chapter, every word seemed cruel. All the technical jargon about virgates and demesne-lands and manorial courts inflicted on her a sense of despair deeper than she had ever felt before. Finally, when she came to a quotation from a mediæval trade charter in Latin, she cried, for no very distinct reason save that she could not help it. After all the issue was plain, and in a certain sense comforting. However low she might descend in the social scale, she was not sacrificing intellectual distinction, for that had never been more than a dream and a mirage.

If ever anyone by taking thought could have added one cubit to her intellectual stature that person must have been she. Time and effort and her heart's blood had gone into the struggle. And nought had availed. . . .

But she put *Growth of the Village Community* amongst the little pile of personal articles that she intended to take with her when she moved into lodgings. . . .

CHAPTER XXI

FALLEN

§ 1

On the afternoon of the fifteenth of April, Catherine sat with her hat and coat as yet unremoved in the front sitting-room of No. 5, Cubitt Lane. She had taken a drastic step, and had only just begun to realize its full significance. Her lips, tense in a manner suggestive of troubled perplexity, began to droop slowly into an attitude of poignant depression. Accustomed as she was to lofty and spacious rooms, this front sitting-room seemed ridiculously small and box-like. The wallpaper was a heavy chocolate brown with a periodic design which from a distance of a few feet looked like a succession of fat caterpillars. A heavy carved overmantel over the fireplace and a sideboard with a mirror on the opposite wall multiplied the room indefinitely into one long vista of caterpillars. Catherine sat disconsolately at a small wicker table by the window. The outlook was disappointing. On the opposite side of the road, children were converging from all directions into the entrance to the Infants' Department of the Cubitt Lane Council School. It was that season of the year devoted to the trundling of iron hoops, and the concrete pavements on both sides of the road rang with them.

Catherine had chosen No. 5, Cubitt Lane because it combined the cheapness of some of the lower-class districts with the respectability of a class several degrees higher than that to which it belonged. Cubitt Lane was a very long road leading from the slums of Bockley to the edge of the Forest, and that portion of it nearest the Forest was in the parish of Upton Rising, and comparatively plutocratic. Only near its junction with Duke Street and round about

the Council Schools was it anything but an eminently high-class residential road. It was curious that, now that fame and affluence had left her, Catherine clung to "respectability" as something that she could not bear to part with. In the old days she had scorned it, regarded it as fit only for dull, prosaic and middle-aged people: now she saw it as the only social superiority she could afford. The days of her youth and irresponsibility were gone. She was a woman—no, more than that, she was a "lady." And she must insist upon recognition of that quality in her with constant reiteration. She must live in a "respectable neighbourhood" in "respectable lodgings." And, until such time as her arm allowed her to regain her fame and reputation as a pianist, she must find some kind of "respectable work."

No. 5, Cubitt Lane was undoubtedly respectable. Yet Catherine, even as she recognized this, was profoundly stirred at the realization of what this red-letter event meant to her. From the wreckage of her dreams and ideals only one remained intact, and that was her ambition as a pianist. That was her one link with the past, and also, she hoped, her one link with the future. She looked at the trumpery little eighteen-guinea piano she had brought with her and saw in it the embodiment of her one cherished ambition. Now that all the others were gone, this solitary survivor was more precious than ever before. Her hand was slowly improving, and soon she would start the long struggle again. Her determination was quieter, more dogged, more tenacious than ever, but the old fiery enthusiasm was gone. It was something that had belonged to her youth, and now that her youth had vanished it had vanished also.

Mrs. Lazenby was a woman of unimpeachable respectability. Widowed and with one daughter, she led a life of pious struggling to keep her precarious footing on the edge of the lower middle classes. Every Sunday she attended the Duke Street Methodist Chapel and sang in a curious shrivelled voice every word of the hymns, chants and anthems. Her crown of glory was to be appointed superintendent of the fancy-work stall at the annual bazaar.

She had not attended the chapel long enough to have known either Catherine's father or mother, and nobody apparently had ever acquainted her with the one exciting event in the annals of the Literary and Debating Society. But she was "known by sight" and "well-respected" of all the leading Methodist luminaries, and once, when she was ill with lumbago, the Rev. Samuel Sparrow prayed for "our dear sister in severe pain and affliction." Her daughter Amelia, a lank, unlovely creature of nineteen, was on week-days a shopgirl at one of the large West-end multiple stores, and on the Sabbath a somewhat jaded and uninspired teacher at the Methodist Sunday Schools. For the latter post she was in all respects singularly unfitted, but her mother's pressure and her own inability to drift out of it as effortlessly as she had seemed to drift in kept her there. She was not a bad girl, but she was weak and fond of pleasure: this latter desire she had to gratify by stealth, and she was in a perpetual state of smothered revolt against the tyranny of home.

Into the ways and habits of this curious household, Catherine slipped with an ease that surprised herself. Mrs. Lazenby treated her with careful respect, for the few personal possessions that Catherine had brought with her were of a style and quality that afforded ample proof of her social eligibility. Then, also, her conversation passed with honours the standard of refinement imposed mentally by Mrs. Lazenby on every stranger she met. Amelia, too, was impressed by Catherine's solitariness and independence, by her secretiveness on all matters touching her past life and future ambitions. All she knew was that Catherine had been a successful professional pianist and had been forced into reduced circumstances by an attack of neuritis. Amelia thought that some day Catherine might become an ally against the pious tyranny of her mother. She cultivated an intimacy with Catherine, told her of many personal matters, and related with much glee scores of her clandestine adventures with "boys." She developed a habit of coming into Catherine's bedroom at night to talk. Catherine was apathetic. At times Amelia's conversation

was a welcome relief from dullness: at other times it was an unmitigated nuisance. But on the whole Catherine's attitude towards Amelia was one of contemptuous tolerance.

§ 2

It was on a sleepy Sunday afternoon in June, whilst Amelia was teaching at the Sunday School and Mrs. Lazenby out visiting a spinster lady of her acquaintance, that Catherine had the sudden impulse to commence the long struggle uphill again whence she had come. The last of Madame Varegny's electric massage treatments had been given and paid for: her arm was practically well again: in every other respect than the financial one the outlook was distinctly hopeful. Outside in Cubitt Lane the ice-cream seller and whelk vendor were going their rounds; a few gramophones and pianos had begun their Sabbath inanities. But as yet the atmosphere was somnolent: you could almost hear (in your imagination, at any rate) the snorings and breathings of all the hundreds of tired folks in Cubitt Lane and Duke Street, in placid contentment sleeping off the effects of a massive Sunday dinner. . . .

Catherine sat down in front of the eighteen-guinea English masterpiece. Mrs. Lazenby had put a covering of red plush on the top of the instrument and crowned that with a number of shells with black spikes, and a lithograph of New Brighton Tower and Promenade in a plush frame of an aggressively green hue. Catherine removed these impedimenta and opened the lid. She decided to practise for exactly one hour. Later on she might have to do two, three, four, five or even more hours per day, but for a start one hour would be ample. She would learn now the extent to which her technique had suffered during her long period of enforced idleness. She would be able to compute the time it would take to recover her lost skill, and could put new hope into her soul by thinking that at last—at last—the tide of her destiny was on the turn. . . .

Rather nervously she began to play. . . .

She started an easy Chopin Ballade. . . . Her memory served her fairly well, and since the music contained no

severe test of technique her hands did not disgrace her. Yet within thirty seconds she stopped playing : she clasped her hands in front of her knees and gazed over the top of the instrument at the caterpillary design on the wallpaper And in that moment the truth flashed upon her incontrovertibly : it came not altogether as a surprise, for with strange divination she had guessed it long before. And it was simply this : she would never again earn a penny by playing a piano in public : more than that, her failure was complete, obvious and devastatingly convincing : she would never again be able to delude herself with false hopes and distant ambitions. Something in the manner of her playing of the first few bars made her think with astonishing calmness : I cannot play any more. . . . She wanted to laugh : it seemed such a ridiculous confession. . . . She looked down at her hands and thought : How do I know that after long practice these may not be of use again ? She could not answer. . . . And yet she knew that she had lost something, something she could not properly describe, but something vital and impossible to replace. Technique, undoubtedly, and memory, and the miraculous flexibility of her ten fingers. And also some subtle and secret capability that in former days had helped her along, something which in a strangely intuitive way she felt to be compounded largely of courage . . . courage. . . . Oh, it was all as incomprehensible as a dream : she felt that she might wake any minute and find herself once again supreme mistress of her hands. . . . And then, more sanely, she told herself : I cannot play any more . . . Finally, as if in querulous petulance at her own reluctance to accept the truth : I really can't play now, can I ? . . . Then she began to remember things that Verreker had said of her playing. She remembered a scrap from a review criticism : " the opinion I have held ever since I first heard Miss Weston, that she is a skilful player of considerable talent who will, however, never reach the front rank of her profession."

Now that she knew the truth as the truth, she knew also that this was what she had been fearing and expecting for weeks and months, that she had been during that time

slowly and imperceptibly accustoming herself to the idea now confronting her, and that for a long time the maintenance of her old dreams and ambitions had been a stupendous self-deception. And she knew also, by a subtle and curious instinct, something which to herself she admitted was amazing and mysterious. She was not going to be very disappointed. Or, if she were, her disappointment, like her former hopes, would be counterfeit. . . . She was angry with herself for accepting the situation so coolly, angry at the callousness of her soul. But nevertheless, the truth stood unassailable: she was not going to be very disappointed. Not disappointed? she argued, in terrific revolt against herself—not disappointed when the last ideal she possessed had joined its fellows on the scrap-heap, not disappointed when nothing remained to shield her from the gutter whence she sprang? Not disappointed to hear the news of her own spiritual extinction? . . . And something within her replied, very quietly: No; what I said was perfectly true. I am not going to be very disappointed.

I was dreading all those hours and hours of practice, she admitted, a little ashamed. And the thought occurred to her: I don't believe I should have the pluck to face an audience. I had once—but not now. Or perhaps it was never pluck that I had—perhaps it was something else that I have lost. . . . Well, the game's played out. It would have meant a terrible lot of work to make myself a pianist again. I shan't need to do all that now. Oh, I have lost . . . courage and . . . enthusiasm . . . for all big things. . . . I am getting old . . . and tired . . . and that's why I am not going to be very disappointed. . . .

Amelia and Mrs. Lazenby might be returning any moment. The crowd of noisy children pouring out of the Council school across the road (it was used by a religious organization on Sunday) proclaimed the hour to be four o'clock. . . . Catherine began to replace the red plush cloth and the shells with black spikes and the lithograph of New Brighton Tower and Promenade. . . .

At ten minutes past the hour Amelia came in, cross and sullen. Catherine heard her slam the hymn book and

Bible on the wicker table in the hall. Evidently her spirit was more than usually in revolt this afternoon. . . .

" Amy ! " Catherine called, opening the door and looking down the passage.

A rather sulky voice replied : " What is it ? "

" Will you come and have tea with me this afternoon ? " Catherine called back cheerfully. The fact was, she wanted somebody to talk to, particularly somebody who was discontented, so that by this she could measure her own rapidly growing contentment.

" Righto," called Amelia, rather less sulkily.

As soon as Amelia entered Catherine's room she started upon a recital of her various woes, chief of which appeared to be the possession of an unfeeling and narrow-minded parent. Catherine listened apathetically, and all the time with conscious superiority she was thinking : This is youth. *I* was like this when I was *her* age. Funny how we grow out of our grievances. . . .

. . . " It's too bad," Amelia was saying. " Only last week Mr. Hobbs asked me to go out to the pictures, and I had to refuse because it wasn't a Saturday."

" Who is Mr. Hobbs ? "

" The salesman in our department . . . and he don't offer to spend his money on anybody *too* often, either."

" Careful with his money, eh ? "

" Careful ?—stingy, I should call it. . . . Takes you in the sixpenny parts at the pictures and if you wants any chocolates he goes up to the girl at the counter and says : ' I'll have a quarter of mixed——' "

Amelia laughed scornfully. " Only it's too bad," she went on, resuming her original theme, " to be compelled to say no when he does ask you out with him ! "

Catherine smiled. She was not of this world. She did not go out to " pictures " with salesmen from West-end departmental stores. . . . Yet with a sudden impulse she said :

" You know, I shall have to be looking about for a job very soon. My arm, you see : I'm doubtful of it being really well for quite a long time. And, of course, I can't

afford to—to go on like this. . . . Any jobs going at your place ? "

Amelia pondered.

" I heard they wanted a girl in the song department. . . . That's next to where I am—I'm in the gramophone line. . . . You know lots about music, don't you ? "

" Oh—fair amount."

" Well, you might get it. I'll see what Mr. Hobbs says. Better come up with me on Tuesday morning."

" Right, I will. . . . I'm pretty sure the job will suit me. . . ."

" I daresay it will . . . and you'll learn what a lot I have to put up with. There's heaps of pictures and theatres and things I'd like to go to up that part of the town, only I can't because of mother. She says——"

And as Catherine listened to Amelia's woes and began the preparations for tea, she actually started to experience in a tired, restricted kind of way a certain species of happiness ! After all, the struggle was over. And the struggle had wearied her, wearied her more than she had herself realized until this very moment. . . . No, she reflected, as she spooned the tea out of the caddy into the teapot—no : I am not going to be very disappointed. . . . But she was just faintly, remotely, almost imperceptibly disappointed at not being disappointed. . . .

CHAPTER XXII

MR. HOBBS

§ 1

A WEDNESDAY morning in June. Catherine had been in the song department for just over a month. Her work was easy and not too monotonous. It consisted in selling ballad songs, and trying them over to customers on the piano. Every day new music came from the publishers, and she had to familiarize herself with it. She was very successful at this kind of work, and was altogether happy in her position.

The stores opened at nine, but business was always slack until half-past ten or thereabouts. Mr. Hobbs, everlastingly attired in a morning coat and butterfly collar, with his hair beautifully oiled and his moustache beautifully curled, and his lips beautifully carven into an attitude of aristocratic politeness, arrived always on the stroke of nine. His first duty was to open the packages from the publishers, but before doing this he would wash his hands carefully lest the journey from South Bockley should have contaminated them. Should also the alignment of his hair-parting have been disturbed in transit he would remedy the defect with scrupulous exactitude. Then, and only then, would he exhibit himself for the delectation of the general public. . . .

On this particular morning Mr. Hobbs did not arrive upon the stroke of nine. Such an event had never been known to happen before. Catherine and Amelia and the other girls of the music department were thrilled with the romance of Mr. Hobbs' non-arrival. In soft whispers they discussed what might possibly have happened to him. The previous evening he had left upon the stroke of six,

seemingly in a state of complete normality, physical and mental. Had some dire fate overwhelmed him? Or—prosaic thought—had he overslept himself? . . .

And then at a quarter past ten Mr. Hobbs entered the portals of the music department. His morning coat was marked by a chalky smudge, his tie was unsymmetrical, his moustache uncurled and his top hat considerably and conspicuously battered.

Was he drunk? The girls waited breathless for an explanation.

"There was an accident to the 8.42 at Liverpool Street," he announced calmly. "It ran into the end of the platform."

"Were you hurt?" Amelia asked him.

"I received no personal hurts," he replied, "but my hat, as you see, is badly damaged." And he pointed solemnly to the hat he held in his hand.

"Well, it's quarter past ten now," said one of the girls. "What did you do all that time?"

"I just went round to the company offices to lodge a complaint," he answered quietly.

"What for?" said Catherine. "You weren't hurt."

"But my hat was," he replied. "And I can't afford to buy a new hat every time the company runs their train into the end of the platform."

Catherine was amazed at the man's utter coolness.

"Well," she said laughingly, "I'm sure if I'd been in a railway accident I should have been so glad to get out without hurting myself that I should never have thought about complaining for a hat."

He smiled—a touch of male superiority made itself apparent in his eyes. Then he delivered judgment.

"One should always," he said massively, "know what one should do in any contingency, however unforeseen. And everyone should be acquainted with the first principles of English law . . . there's those parcels down from Augeners', Miss Weston. . . ."

§ 2

All the rest of the day he was serene in his little groove.

At lunch-time he went out to buy a new top hat.

But the next day he unbent a little. About closing time he approached Catherine and placed a little green book on the counter before her. It was one of those six-penny volumes called the " People's Books." Its title was *Everyday Law*, by J. J. Adams.

" Perhaps this would interest you," he said. " It is very short and simple to understand, and it tells you a good many things that every modern man and woman should know."

" Thank you," she stammered, slightly overwhelmed.

" I have underlined the pages relating to railway accidents," he went on.

And she thought: " He has actually spent sixpence on me ! "

But he continued: " You need not be in a hurry to return it to me. . . . In fact "—in a burst of generosity—" keep it until you are quite sure you have finished with it."

" Thank you," she said again, and was surprised to feel herself blushing scarlet. . . .

§ 3

Catherine bought her daily paper in the evening and read it in the train while Amelia occupied herself with a novel. That evening she read the account of the railway accident that had taken place at Liverpool Street Station the day before. Several persons were taken to hospital " suffering from cuts and contusions," but " were allowed to return home later in the day." And amongst those who " complained of shock " she read the name:

Mr. James Hobbs . . . 272A, Myrtle Road, South Bockley.

Incidentally that told her where he lived. . . .

§ 4

The summer sun shone down upon the scorched London streets, and the lives of those who worked in the music department of Ryder and Sons were monotonously uneventful. Every morning Catherine and Amelia caught the 8.12 from Bockley and arrived in Liverpool Street at 8.37. Every morning Mr. Hobbs said "Good morning," with exquisite politeness, to all the female assistants. Every lunch-time Mr. Hobbs went to the same A.B.C. tea-shop, sat at the same marble-topped table, was served by the same waitress, to whom he addressed the mystic formula "usual please," which resulted in the appearance some minutes later of a glass of hot milk and a roll and butter. During the meal he scanned the headlines of the morning paper, but after the last mouthful had been carefully masticated he gave himself up to a fierce scrutiny of the stock markets. Was his ambition to be a financier? . . .

If Amelia was sullen on a Sunday afternoon, there were occasions when she was sullen on week-days also. A sulky discontent was ingrained in her nature, and Catherine was often treated to exhibitions of it. Then suddenly Catherine discovered the reason. Amelia was jealous of her. Amelia regarded her own relationship with Mr. Hobbs as promising enough to merit high hopes: these high hopes had been blurred, it seemed, by the swift dazzlement of Catherine.

Catherine was amused. Chronically jealous as she herself had been in her time, she had no sympathy whatever with others afflicted with the same disease. And Amelia's jealousy seemed absurd and incredible. Catherine was beginning to take a malicious dislike to Amelia. Mr. Hobbs was so scrupulously correct in his treatment of them both that Amelia's jealousy became ludicrously trivial. In her youthful days Catherine would have tried to flirt extravagantly with him for the mere pleasure of torturing Amelia, but now her malice had become a thing of quieter if of deadlier potency. She would wait. She did not like him at all, but she did not blame him in the least for preferring herself to Amelia. It was inconceivable that any man

should desire Amelia. She would wait: she would be as friendly with Mr. Hobbs as she chose (which did not imply a very deep intimacy), and Amelia and her jealousy, if she still persisted in it, could go to the devil.

Even to Mr. Hobbs her attitude was curiously compounded of pity and condescension. As much as to say: I don't enjoy your company particularly, but I am taking pity on you: I know how awful it must be for a man to have anything to do with that horrid Miss Lazenby. But don't presume upon my kindness.

He did indeed begin to talk to her rather more than the strict business of the shop required. And in doing so he displayed the poverty of his intellect. He had a mind well stocked with facts—a sort of abridged encyclopædia—and that was all.

He brought her a piece of newly published music to try over. She played it through and remarked that it was very pretty, not because she thought it was, but because the habit of saying things like that had grown upon her.

"*Very* pretty," he agreed. "There's a—a something—in it—a peculiar sort of melody—oriental, you know, isn't there?"

"Yes," she admitted. "There is, quite."

"It's strange," he went on, "how some pieces of music are quite different from others. And yet the same. You know what I mean. When you've heard them you say, 'I've heard that before!' And yet you haven't. I suppose it must be something in them."

"I suppose so."

"It's in a minor, isn't it?—Ah, there's something in minors. Something. I don't know quite how to describe it. A sort of mournfulness, you know. I like minors, don't you?"

"Very much."

They talked thus for several minutes, and then he asked her to come out with him the following Saturday afternoon. Chiefly out of curiosity she accepted. . . .

§ 5

" That's just where you're wrong, Amy," she replied, as they walked along the High Road from Bockley Station, " I don't like him a bit. I think he's one of the dullest and most empty-headed men I've ever met. So there ! "

" You thought he was clever enough after that train accident when he went to claim damages, anyway."

" Oh, that ?—That's only a sort of cheap smartness. A kind of pounciness. Like a pawnbroker's assistant. I tell you he's got no real brains worth calling any."

" Then if you don't like him why are you going out with him on Saturday ? "

" 'Cos I am. Why shouldn't I ? It'll be your turn maybe the week after. Hasn't the poor man a right to ask out any girl besides you ? "

" I believe you *do* like him. . . ."

" What ?—Like *him* ?—*Him* ?—If I couldn't find a better man than that I'd go without all my life, I would. Take him, my dear Amy, take him and God bless both of you ! Don't think *I* shall mind ! "

" Oh, you needn't talk like that. And you needn't despise them that hasn't got brains. I suppose you wanter marry a genius, eh ? "

Catherine laughed.

" Not particularly," she replied carefully, as if she were pondering over the subject, " but I know this much : I wouldn't marry a man unless he'd got brains."

" Ho—wouldn't you ? "

" No, I wouldn't. . . ."

§ 6

They spent Saturday afternoon at the Zoo.

" A very interesting place," he said, as they were strolling through Regent's Park, with a July sun blazing down upon them. " And instructive," he added complimentarily.

The snake-house was very hot, and in front of a languid Indian python he remarked : " Poor things—to be stuffed

up like that in a glass case. . . ." He seemed to be searching for a humane plane on which to steer their conversation.

And in the lion house, as they stopped in front of a huge lioness, he remarked facetiously: "How should you like to be shut up alone with that creature, eh?"

"Not at all," she replied, with absurd seriousness.

They had tea in the open air near the elephant's parade-ground. During the meal he said slowly and thrillingly: "I had a stroke of luck yesterday."

Politeness required her to be interested and reply: "Oh, did you? What was it?"

He coughed before answering. He made a little bending gesture with his head, as if to indicate that he was about to take her somewhat into his confidence.

"Last year," he began, "I bought a certain number of shares for five hundred pounds. The day before yesterday these shares were worth five hundred and ninety-five pounds. Yesterday their value increased to six hundred and forty pounds. To-day they may be worth a still higher figure. . . . So, you see, yesterday I earned, in a kind of way, forty-five pounds. And without any effort on my part, besides. Forty-five pounds in one day isn't bad, is it?"

"Quite good," she murmured vaguely. She wondered if she would startle him by saying that she had earned much more than forty-five pounds in a couple of hours. She decided not to try.

"Curious how money makes money, isn't it?" he went on. "Wonderful thing—modern finance. . . . Of course I am saving up. After all, a man wants a home some day, doesn't he? As soon as I come across the right girl I shall get married. . . ."

He paused for effect.

"If she'll let you," put in Catherine, from no apparent motive.

He appeared ruffled.

"Oh, of course," he said, "if she'll let me. Of course. How could I otherwise? . . . Look at that elephant: those boys have given him a bath bun."

He seemed to think he had been sufficiently confidential.

" It's nice to feel you've got a bit of capital behind you," he said smugly, and Catherine replied : " Yes, very nice."

Then he developed a spurious boisterousness.

After tea they walked round all the open-air portions of the establishment. One of the elephants picked up coins off the ground and put them in his keeper's pocket. Mr. Hobbs threw down a penny.

" Clever animal," he remarked, after the trick had been successfully performed, " but I expect the man keeps the money."

" I daresay he does," said Catherine.

Outside the monkey enclosure he said : " I suppose we were all like this at one time. . . . Swinging from trees by our tails. That's what Darwin said, didn't he ? "

Afterwards, in Regent's Park, he became himself again. At Portland Road Underground Station he bought an evening paper and consulted its inside page minutely.

" My shares," he announced, *sotto voce*, as they sat together in the train, " are now worth six hundred and sixty pounds. Another rise, you see. . . . Nothing like money for making money, is there ? "

" No," she replied distantly. . . .

When Catherine got back to Cubitt Lane, Amelia said : " Well—had a good time ? "

There was something so spiteful in Amelia's tone that Catherine felt compelled to say : " Oh yes, rather ! Had a lovely time ! And Mr. Hobbs was awf'ly nice ! "

§ 7

She was in a groove now. The rebuilding of her soul no longer troubled her. She was content to be as she was. Her egoism, her insane self-conceit fell from the lofty plane which had been their sole excuse, and worked in narrower and more selfish channels. In Cubitt Lane she was considered proud and " stuck-up." She did not associate with the " young fellers up the road," nor did she frequent the saloon-bar of the King's Head. In all things she was quiet, aloof and unimpeachably respectable. She was always dressed neatly and well, and she did not possess

any dress which, by its showiness and general lack of utility, bore the label "Sundays only." Now that she was in a district where fine talk was unusual, she began to be vain of her language and accent. To Amelia she was always scornful and consciously aloof: even to Mr. Hobbs she was not loth to betray an attitude of innate superiority. And Mr. Hobbs did not mind it. The more arrogant her mien, the more scornful her tone, the more he singled her out for his preferences and favours.

The Duke Street Methodist Chapel, despite its frowsy surroundings, had always been famous as the last refuge of unimpeachable respectability. Its external architecture was as the respectability of its patrons, severe and uncompromising. And the Reverend Samuel Swallow, excellent man though he was, did not fulfil the ideal of a spiritual guide. His sermons were upright, and as often happens, stiff-necked as well. There was too much noise and bombast about him. Too much chumminess in his dealings with the Almighty. Catherine went to one Sunday evening's service, and those were her mental criticisms. She sat in one of the front pews, and exhibited her superiority by dropping a sixpence gently on to a pile of coppers when the plate came round. The building had recently been re-decorated, and stank abominably of paint. In the choir, where years ago her mother had stood and yelled, a new galaxy of beauty sang down menacingly over the shoulders of the Rev. Samuel Swallow. . . . And before the sermon the latter announced: "Whan of our brethren has presented us with a timepiece, which, as you may perhaps have noticed, is now fixed immediately beneath the rails of the gahllery." (General craning of necks and shuffling of collars to look at it.) . . . "I trust—indeed, I am sure—that none of you will show your impatience towards the conclusion of my sermon by looking round too frequently at this recent addition to the amenities of our church. . . ." A soft rustling titter, instinct with unimpeachable respectability. . . .

Catherine decided that she could not join a "place" like that. She had decided to join a "place" of some sort, because joining a "place" was an indispensable item of

respectability. But she wanted her respectability to be superior to other people's respectability, superior to Amelia's, superior to Mrs. Lazenby's, superior to the Rev. Samuel Swallow's. Her conceit now wanted to make her more respectable than any other person she knew.

She asked Mr. Hobbs if he belonged to a church.

He replied: "I am afraid my time and avocations do not permit me to attend regularly at any place of worship. . . . But I often go to the City Temple. . . . I consider religion an excellent thing. . . ."

She determined to be more respectable than Mr. Hobbs.

"Of course," she said freezingly, "I am Church of England. . . ."

§ 8

The Bockley Parish Church was large, ancient and possessed an expensive clientele. Into this clientele Catherine entered. Her entrance was not at first noticed. She rented a seat, carried her hymn and prayer-books piously to and from the service, and purchased a second-hand hassock at a valuation off the previous occupant. The Rev. Archibald Pettigrew shook hands with her occasionally, and raised his hat if he passed her in the street. At a church concert she volunteered as accompanist for some songs, but her professional efficiency did not attract attention.

One of the curates, fresh from Cambridge, saw her and took notice. He was very youthful and very enthusiastic; secretly ritualist, he dabbled in music, and indulged in unseemly bickerings with the organist and choirmaster. He wanted the choir to sing like the choir at King's College, Cambridge. He would have liked to deliver a Latin grace at the annual boys' outing to Hainault Forest. In most of these things the Rev. Archibald Pettigrew exerted a restraining influence upon him. But in Catherine the young enthusiast thought he saw a kindred spirit. This young woman, so quiet, so demure, so earnest and pious in her religious observances, was she not destined to be his helper and confidante?

He lent her tracts and showed her some candlesticks he

had purchased in Paternoster Row. And frequently he came to Cubitt Lane and produced an overwhelming impression on Mrs. Lazenby by giving her a visiting card inscribed with :

The Rev. Elkin Broodbank, St. Luke's Vicarage, Bockley.

And Catherine was unspeakably charmed and flattered by his attentions. But she was not impressed by his personality. He had none. . . .

CHAPTER XXIII

ONCE AGAIN

§ 1

On the Monday morning exactly a week before the August Bank Holiday, Catherine unpacked the morning's music with a quiet satisfaction that knew no bounds. She was by this time a changed woman. No longer impetuous and hasty, no longer fiery and passionate, no longer a creature of mood and fancy: she was quiet, restrained, dignified almost to the point of arrogance, immensely reliable, and becoming a little shrewd. She had earned the reputation of being an expert saleswoman. There was scarcely a piece of music, or a song, or an orchestral setting which she did not know of: she was a mine of recondite information about violin obligatos and harp accompaniments and so forth. Even Mr. Hobbs, who had hitherto passed as a paragon, acknowledged in her a superior. His mind was merely a memorized and remarkably accurate music catalogue: hers was full of scraps of another world, scraps that raised her above her fellows. Never, even in her greatest days, had her superiority seemed so incontestable as now. Never had she been so quietly proud, so serenely confident that the deference accorded her was no more than her due.

As she untied the string round a bulky parcel of new ballad songs she reflected upon her own unconquerable supremacy. Over in the gramophone department was Amelia, sorting a new consignment of records. Amelia looked as usual, sullen and morose. And it gave Catherine a curious satisfaction to see Amelia looking sullen and morose. Partly, no doubt, because it threw into vivid relief her own superb serenity. But there was another

reason. Amelia's moroseness had a good deal to do with Catherine's relations with Mr. Hobbs. There had been a time when Mr. Hobbs had seemed to be showing Amelia a significant quantity of his attention. Not so now. To Catherine he gave all the attention he had previously bestowed upon Amelia, coupled with a deference which he had never offered to Amelia at all. Amelia felt herself deposed from a somewhat promising position. But it was not Catherine's fault. . . . Catherine never encouraged Mr. Hobbs. She gave him piquant rebuffs and subtle discouragements, and frequent reminders that she was superior to him. She was always distant and unresponsive, and sometimes a little contemptuous. But the more did he return to the assault. Her superb aloofness enchanted him. Her pride, her royal way of taking homage as no more than her due, her splendid self-aplomb convinced him that this was the woman to be Mrs. Hobbs. . . . So Catherine did not encourage him. It would have been rather silly to do so. And as she saw Amelia looking so sullen and morose, she thought: "Foolish creature! Fancy her thinking that I'm cutting her out! Why, who could help preferring me to her? And I have never encouraged him, I'm quite sure of that . . . I'm not a bit to blame. . . ."

On the desk beside her was a single sheet of writing-paper inscribed with the handwriting of Mr. Hobbs. It was his day for visiting publishers, and it was evident to Catherine that he must have gone considerably out of his way to come to the shop and leave this note for her. And to induce Mr. Hobbs to go out of his way was to create a revolution in his entire scheme of existence. Well did Catherine know this, and as she read she smiled triumphantly.

DEAR MISS WESTON,

Don't forget to repeat the order if those songs from Breitkopf and Härtel don't arrive. I shall be back about three this afternoon.

Yrs. sincerely,

J. A. HOBBS.

and—

P.S.—Are you free next Saturday afternoon? If so, we could go to Box Hill and Reigate.

Catherine, therefore, smiled triumphantly.

There was absolutely no need whatever for him to remind her to repeat the order. That was part of the ordinary routine of her business. He knew she would do that: his reminder had been merely an excuse for something upon which to hang a P.S. Silly man!—Did he imagine such a transparent subterfuge could deceive her?

She did not particularly like him. He was not more to her than any other man. But she liked him to like her. She liked the sensation of entering the settled calm and ordered routine of his existence and exploding there like a stick of dynamite. He had faults. He was too careful with his money, too prone to give money a higher place than it deserved. And his mind, when he strove to divert it into philosophical channels, was woefully sterile. But he so obviously reverenced her. With a quiet dignity he demanded to be treated as an inferior. There was no resisting such an appeal. Whether she liked him or not she could not help liking the immense compliment he paid her by his whole attitude. . . . It was not that he had not a high opinion of himself. He had, and that enhanced the significance of the fact that his opinion of her was higher still. . .

Next Saturday afternoon? . . . Yes, no doubt she would be free next Saturday afternoon. . . .

§ 2

As the morning progressed she transacted her business steadily and methodically. About three in the afternoon Mr. Hobbs returned. She was careful to show no eagerness to see him, careful that she should not betray by her countenance or manner her reply to his invitation. He, on his part, was quite ready to fall in with her pretence. He attended to various matters in the gramophone department and left her very much to herself. When he spoke to her it was strictly on business, and with a frigid professional politeness.

At a few minutes past four he called her to the telephone. A gentleman wanted a piece of music, and he did not know

what exactly it was or where it could be obtained. Perhaps Miss Weston would oblige. . . .

Catherine went to the instrument.

It tickled her vanity to be appealed to as a last resource. She tossed her head a little proudly as she put her ear to the receiver.

A strange thing happened. . . .

Someone was speaking down the instrument, and at the sound of his voice Catherine flushed a deep red. A wave of recognition and recollection and remembrance swept over and engulfed her. She did not hear what he said.

" Again, please," she muttered huskily, in a tone not in the least like her usual, " I didn't quite catch. . . ."

The voice boomed in rather irritated repetition.

" Bach double-piano concerto," it said, " in C minor. . . . Bach . . . for two pianos . . . do you understand ? "

She tried to grasp it while her mind was busied with a million other things.

" It goes like this . . ." the voice went on, and commenced a weird nasal rumble like a tube-train emerging from a tunnel . . . . " Da-da-da-da-da-daddaddadd-addadd-addah."

She smiled ! Once again fate had flung to her a moment of triumph. Long ago, when the man at the other end of the telephone had been her friend, she had learnt specially for him a work of Bach which was little known and not likely to be much cared about. Her gift had never been offered. . . . And now, after all this interval, he was enquiring about the very piece she had learned for him !

She put the telephone apparatus on the top of the piano on which she tried things over. Then sitting down she played over the first few bars of the concerto. . . . Keeping the receiver to her ear she heard :

" That's it !—That's the one !—Do you know it ?—Curious —well, well, get it for me, will you. . . . Good !—I've tried all over town for it. . . ."

" What address ? " she enquired mechanically.

The voice replied : " Professor Verreker . . . Seahill . . . Barhanger, Essex."

As she walked back to the counter Mr. Hobbs said : " Did you know what the gentleman wanted ? "

" Yes," she replied fiercely, triumphantly, contemptuously. He stared at her. He did not know that a change had passed swiftly over her. He did not know that the sound of a man's voice spoken over fifty miles had swept her out of the calm seas into the wind and rain and storm. He did not know that once again she was in deep and troubled waters, fighting for life and a sure footing. He thought his invitation had offended her. He made haste to apologize.

" I hope," he began, " you didn't mind me asking you to Box——"

" I'm afraid," she replied impatiently, " I can't come . . I've . . . I've another engagement. . . ."

And he went away into the gramophone department. . . .

§ 3

The knowledge that Verreker was in England, within approachable distance of her, gave her a strange, complicated mixture of pleasure and annoyance. Deep down in her heart she knew that to see him again would be as a breath of life after ages of dim existence. Yet she was annoyed, because she had grown to be satisfied with the dull, drab routine of her days : she had built up a new, and on the whole satisfactory scheme of existence on the supposition that she should never see him again. She did not want to see him again. She did not want to have anything to do with him. And yet she knew that some day either circumstances or her own initiative would bring her face to face with him once more. . . . She knew that his place in her life had not achieved finality, that there was more to say and to hear, and great decisions to be made.

Secretly she knew that some day, when the impulse seized her, she would go to visit him at Barhanger. But with amazing credulity she told herself : Of course I shall never go to see him. If he cares to ask me I will come. But he must take the initiative, not I. . . . But she began to picture their meeting. She began to conjure up images

of Seahill and the Essex countryside and he and she walking and talking amidst a background of her own imagining. Just as in the old days she had invented an "ideal" conversation to be pursued at any surprise meeting with her father, so now she concocted a special dialogue between herself and Verreker, which, if he should only play the part allotted to him, would reveal her in an attractive and mysterious light Of course he would not do so: of that she was quite certain, yet the manufacture of ideal rôles for him and herself gave her a good deal of restricted pleasure. She must at this time have decided definitely to go and see him, otherwise there could have been no inducement for her to dream dreams. But she still told herself that she would not see him till he had seen her. . . . One evening she visited the reference department of the Bockley Carnegie library and consulted a map of Essex. Barhanger was almost on the sea-coast; five miles from the nearest railway station, overlooking one of the great tidal estuaries of the Essex rivers. And Barhanger Creek reached right up to the village of Barhanger. . . . She had not thought it was so near the sea. She had pictured an inland village with a village green and thatched cottages and perhaps a single-line railway station. Now she had to dream her dreams over again in a different setting, and into this new setting came the creek and the broad estuary and the shining sea, all magnificently idealized, all transfigured by the presence of herself and Verreker. . . .

It was curious how the thought of him awoke in her old dreams and aspirations. She began once more to revile her own soul for its selfishness and avarice: she began to wish for her old pianoforte prowess and such education as she had once managed to cram into that head of hers. Yet against her will was all this change and flurry: she was always protesting, I am better as I am. I want to be quiet and respectable. I don't want to see him or to know him, because he has unlimited power to make me unhappy. . . .

Her superb serenity left her. She became once more a foolish, unreliable creature of fierce trivialities. She no longer took any interest in the affairs of Amelia and her

mother and Mr. Hobbs. She began to think rather acutely of Helen, though. How would Helen come into the matter? Would Helen be jealous of her interference? . . And did he love Helen? Or was it only a marriage of convenience? All those things she would never find out unless she visited him. Though, of course, she would not visit him without an invitation. That was quite decided.

On the Saturday morning before the August Bank Holiday Mr. Hobbs left a note for her on her desk. She slipped it in her handbag without opening it. . . . She was concerned with other things. And when she got home on Saturday afternoon she discovered on her table a card left by the Rev. Elkin Broodbank, of St. Luke's Vicarage, Bockley. This also she dropped unceremoniously into her handbag. . . . She was concerned with other things. . . . She next took up an A.B.C. railway guide, and searched it carefully for some minutes. Then she shut it with a bang and went to her bedroom to decorate herself. She was not so charming as she once had been, and so the process of decoration became a longer one. Her hair—the thing of her she most prized—had begun to be dull and lack-lustre: the eyes, too, had lost vivacity. She was no longer a young woman. . . . Oh, the horror of growing old, when youth has taken charm away! . . . But she was concerned with other things. She scribbled a note to Mrs. Lazenby and left it on the kitchen table. Then she walked discreetly down the steps into Cubitt Lane, and by way of Makepeace Common to Bockley Station. . . .

CHAPTER XXIV

THE LAST PHASE

§ 1

On the Colchester and Ipswich train it was still possible for her to think. I am not necessarily going to Barhanger. I have a ticket to Holleshont, and there are many places one can get to from Holleshont besides Barhanger. Besides, even if I do get to Barhanger, Barhanger is no doubt an ideal place in which to spend a Bank Holiday week-end. There is no earthly reason why I shouldn't go to Barhanger. It is close to the sea, and I need a holiday. . . .

And secretly she rejoiced at the ecstasy of the thought: I am going to see him. Whatever he says or does, whatever the issue may be, whatever I suffer then or afterwards, I shall see him. . . . As the train rolled over the drab eastern suburbs she revelled in the sensation that every throb and pulsation of the wheels narrowed the distance between herself and him. . . . And withal came another part of her answering her coldly, reprovingly: You are silly to go on this fool's errand. You are losing the satisfaction and contentment it took you so long to acquire. Where now is your ambition to lead a quiet, sedate and respectable life, without the storm and stress of emotional escapades? Where now in your mind's perspective are Mr. Hobbs and the Rev. Elkin Broodbank? Oh, you fool! you will suffer, and it will be your own fault. You will have the old slow fight over again, you will have to build up your contentment right from the bottom. . . . Oh, you fool! . . . And still her heart answered: I don't care. I am going to *see* him. . . . I am going to see *him*. . . .

Between Romford and Chelmsford she remembered the unopened letter that she had in her handbag from Mr. Hobbs.

She tore it open and read it. It was a strange mixture of hopeless adoration and ruffled dignity.

My dear Miss Weston,

I am very sorry indeed if my invitation for Saturday offended you. I am glad to think your reason for declining it is that you had another engagement to fulfil. In the circumstances, is it too impertinent of me if I invite you to spend the Bank Holiday on the Surrey Hills? I know the district pretty well, and am sure you will enjoy the fine scenery as well as the invigorating air. There is a motor omnibus service as far as Reigate, and we could get from there to a number of interesting spots. Hoping you will be able to come with me.

Believe me,
Yours sincerely,
J. A. Hobbs.

She smiled wanly upon the drearily angular handwriting. In rummaging in her handbag she had come across the Rev. Elkin Broodbank's visiting card, left by him that morning, and she caught sight of some writing on the back which she had previously overlooked. "I find you not in," the Rev. Elkin had written, in his finicky handwriting and pseudo-Carlylean prose style, "so I leave this. Will you have tea with me on Sunday? I have old MSS. church rubric to show you: also good booklet on Oxford movement.—Yrs., E. B."

Also upon this she smiled wanly. . . .

Chelmsford. . . .

Oh, what have I done with my life? she cried to herself in a moment of sudden horror. What have I to show for all these years of toil and stress? Is there anything of all that I have ever had which has lasted? I am twenty-four years old, and my youth is over. I have had dreams, I have had ambitions, I have had golden opportunities and been near success. But what have I to show? Have I any hold on life which death would not loose? Am I deep set in the heart of any friend, man or woman, in the world? Whatever happens to me, does it matter to anyone save myself? No, no, and therefore I am going to Barhanger. I would go to Barhanger if it cost me pain for the rest of my life. . . .

At the junction station midway between Chelmsford and Colchester she got out. On the opposite platform the train for Holleshont was waiting. Small and feeble it looked beside the great express, but there was an air of sturdy independence about it, and especially about its single track curving away over the hills into the dim distance. Catherine breathed the country air with avidity : she entered a compartment and leaned out of the window as the express rolled slowly out of the other platform. As it vanished into the north-east the station became full of broken silences and staccato sounds. Glorious ! she murmured, as the sun warmed her cheeks and the wind wafted to her the scent of pansies growing on the embankment near by. And then suddenly, as if it had a fit of divine inspiration, the train moved off. . . .

Over the dim hills, stopping at tiny halts, with waiting-rooms and booking halls fashioned out of wheelless railway carriages, up steep slopes where the grass grew long between the rails, curving into occasional loops, and pausing sometimes like a hard-worked animal taking breath. And then, from the top of a hill, the miles drooped gently into the bosom of the estuary : the tide was out and the mud shone golden in the sun. Yachts were lying stranded off the fairway, and threading the broad belt of mud the river ran like a curve of molten gold. There were clusters of houses here and there on either bank, and a church with a candle-snuffer tower, and stretches of brown shingle. . . . And the train went gathering speed as it broke over the summit. . . .

At Holleshont the estuary was no longer in view, but the sea-smell was fresh in the air. " Barhanger ? " she said to a man with a pony and trap who was waiting outside the station. He nodded, and helped her to a seat beside him. He was buxom and red-faced and jolly. If he had been younger, it would have been rather romantic to go driving with him thus along the lonely country lanes. But he was taciturn, and stopped once to pluck from the side of the hedge a long grass to suck. At times he broke into humming, but it was a tune Catherine did not recognize. After half an hour's riding they came upon a dishevelled

country lane, which on turning a corner became immediately the main street of a village. They passed a church and a public-house, a post-office, a pump, and then another public-house. At this last the driver pulled his horse to a standstill and indicated to Catherine that she should descend. "Barhanger," he muttered explanatorily. Seeing her uncertainty, he questioned her. "Lookin' f'ranywhere partic'ler, miss?"

She replied with a momentary impulse: "Seahill."

He pointed in a southerly direction.

And now she was walking straight to "Seahill." . . .

The road narrowed into an ill-defined pathway and climbed abruptly on to the top of the sea-wall. A long arm of the great shining estuary lay stretched at her feet, and dotted about it were scores of mudbanks overgrown with reeds and sea-lavender. The grasses rose high as her knees, and she pushed through them and against the wind till her cheeks were flushed with exertion. At the mouth of the creek the estuary rolled infinitely in either direction, and miles and miles of brown-black mud were hissing in the sunlight. "Glorious!" she cried, and flung back her head proudly to meet the wind that swept the corner of the creek. She turned to the right and walked on swiftly. Behind her, looking quite near, but really a good distance away, the village of Barhanger slept drowsily in the afternoon heat: ahead the sea-wall swelled and rolled into great meaningless curves. Not a human being besides herself occupied the landscape. The mud hissed and cracked, and the grasshoppers chattered and the wind shook the long grasses into waving tumult. And over on the mudbanks the sea-gulls gathered and rose and called shrilly, and swooped down again to rest. . . .

At one point the land rose slightly inland from the sea-wall, and perched on the crest of the low hill there stood an old-fashioned red-bricked house with a litter of sheds and stabling around it. Something told her that this was "Seahill." A pathway wound upwards through the long meadow-grass: the pale green streak over the darker green told her that this was a method of approach used some-

times, but not frequently. And there were ditches to cross—ditches banked with mud, which at high tide must have been brimming with salt water. . . .

§ 2

She found her way into a sort of courtyard formed by the back of the house and surrounding outbuildings. And there, throwing food to some chickens, was Helen!

"Cathie!" Helen's voice was full of glad welcome.

Helen had grown a fine woman, somewhat stout perhaps, but upright and fine-looking. She kissed Catherine affectionately, and in her quiet way made a great fuss over her.

"How did you know we were here?" she asked, as she led Catherine into the house by way of the kitchen.

"Quite by chance," replied Catherine. "I just happened to hear somebody mention it—somebody in the musical line."

"Ah—my husband knows so many people, doesn't he? And how about your arm? Of course we heard all about that, you know——"

"Oh, that's getting better again slowly. When did you come back from America?"

"America?" Helen's face showed a blank. "We never went to America. Who told you that?"

Catherine flushed a little. "I don't remember," she replied nonchalantly. "It must have been a wrong idea I picked up from somebody."

They chatted on for some time and then Helen said:

"Well, perhaps you would like to go and see my husband. He's in his study—straight up the steps and second on the left. He'll be working, but he'll be glad to see you, I daresay. He used to be very interested in you, didn't he?"

"I'll go up and see him," replied Catherine quietly.

She ascended the steps and found her way to the door of his study. With some trepidation she knocked. . . .

§ 3

It was a large room facing the west. The sun shone drowsily on a table littered with papers and opened books

There was the piano which she had so often played in the music-room at "Claremont." There were the same book-cases, with glass doors swung open, and the aperture between the tops of the books and the shelf above filled with letters and papers. That had always been one of his untidy habits. And scattered over all the available wall-space were disconnected fragments of shelving, sagging in the middle if the span were wide, and piled high with longitudinal and horizontal groups of books. The old brown leather armchairs and the club-fender occupied positions in front of the fireplace. The carpet was thick, and littered here and there with the grey smudge of tobacco-ash and scraps of torn paper that had escaped the meshes of the basket. The scene was curiously similar to that on which she had first seen him at "Claremont." He was sitting in one of his armchairs with an adjustable reading bracket in front of him. She could see nothing of him, but a coil of rising smoke that straggled upwards from the back of the chair told her that he existed. She had knocked on the door before entering, and his voice had drawled its usual "Come in." He had heard the door open and close again, but he did not look round. She knew this habit of his. Doubtless he would wait to finish the sentence or maybe the paragraph he was reading. She came across the intervening space and entered the limits within which his eye could not avoid seeing her. The sun caught her hair and flung it into radiance; she was glad of this, for it made her seem youthful again.

She saw him for a fraction of a second before he caught sight of her. And a strange feeling of doubt, of perplexity—might it be even of disappointment?—touched upon her. He was the same, quite the same. And yet—there was a sense in which he was not as she expected. But she had not expected him to be very much changed. It was only a passing phase that swept across her—hardly to be understood, much less explained. But she felt it, and it surprised her.

When he saw her he opened his eyes very wide and stared. Then he pushed back the book-rest and rose from his chair. All the time she was watching him narrowly. There was

a queer phase during which neither of them moved or attempted to move. And then, the tension becoming too great to be borne, she gave her head a little toss and said: "Well?"

She had an absurd feeling of curiosity about his first words to her. In her ideal dialogue with him he struck an attitude of surprise and bewilderment and ejaculated, after the manner of the hero in a melodrama: "What?—*You*!—*You*! Is it really *you*?"

Of course he did nothing like that. She might have expected her fancied conversation to go all wrong from the start. He slowly and cautiously held out his right hand, and smiled a careful, quizzical smile.

And his first words were: "How are you?"

"Very well," she replied mechanically.

There was a pause, after which he said: "Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you," she replied, and occupied the other armchair. He still remained standing and smoking.

"I suppose," he said reflectively, "you got the address from the Directory?"

"No," she replied nonchalantly, "it was quite by accident. I am one of the assistants in the music department of Ryder and Sons, and you yourself gave me your address over the telephone last Monday."

"What a startling coincidence!" he muttered, as if by way of comment to himself.

Pause. . . .

"So," he went on meditatively, "you were the young lady who knew the Bach double-piano concerto from memory! Curious! . . . I thought it was remarkable, and the next time I was in town I intended coming up to Ryder's to see who you were. . . . Perhaps it is well I didn't. . . . We might have startled each other."

"We might," she said quietly.

Long pause. . . .

"I don't remember your ever playing the concerto when I knew you," he resumed, still in the rôle of a somewhat curious spectator. "I never taught it you, did I?"

" No," she answered. " I learnt it myself." And there was just a momentary gleam of fire within at that remark. As much as to say : " Don't think I am not capable of doing *some* things myself."

" Do you know all of it ? " he asked.

" I did—but I don't know if I remember it all now."

He tapped his pipe on the mantelpiece.

" I wish you'd play it for me," he said, slowly and still meditatively, " I should like very much to hear it . . . and besides . . . it would . . . give me time to think. . . ."

" To think what ? " she put in sharply.

He sat down, filled his pipe afresh and lit it, saying as he did so : " Well—to think—one of the things, at any rate—why you have come."

There was something in the tone of that last remark of his which stung her to the retort :

" So you think it is possible for me to go to the piano and play a Bach concerto while you sit coolly down to wonder why I have come ? "

" Well," he said, suddenly and with emphasis, " why *have* you come ? "

" You said if I was ever over in the States I was to come and see you. I naturally expected that the invitation would extend to when you returned to England."

" Did it not occur to you," he remarked slowly, " that when I returned from the States I should have sent you my address if I had desired to see you ? "

" Of course," she interposed neatly, " as it happens, I know that you never went to America at all."

He did not seem greatly ruffled by this.

" Then," he continued, " you know that I told you a lie. And you may have the satisfaction—if it is a satisfaction—of knowing also that you are the only person in the whole world who has ever made me do that. That honour," he added bitterly, " you share with no one : it is yours entirely."

She felt : Now we are getting to it.

" I don't know why it should have been so necessary for you to tell me a lie," she said.

" The fact is," he announced brutally, " I wanted to get rid of you, and that seemed the only way."

She winced a little at his words, but interposed sharply :

" Why did you want to get rid of me ? "

He grunted something incoherent, and began to walk towards the door.

" Look here," he said, " we'll go for a walk. I'm not going to have you quarrelling in here."

" But surely we aren't going to quarrel ? "

" On the contrary, we *are* going to quarrel. We're going to quarrel most damnably. . . . Come on ! "

He led her back down the steps into the kitchen. Helen was there preparing a meal. As he passed he addressed her.

" Miss Weston and I are going out for a stroll along the sea-wall, Helen. . . . We shan't be long. Miss Weston has to get back to town to-night, so she hasn't got much time to spare."

" You've missed the last train already," replied Helen.

" I shall take her in the car to the junction in time for the night train," he answered.

" All right. . . . I shall see you again, shan't I, Cathie ? "

" We shall be back in half an hour," he said curtly.

When they were out of Helen's hearing Catherine said :

" Who told you I had to be back in town to-night ? "

" I told myself," he replied. " I insist upon your going back to-night."

" And supposing I don't ? "

" I can only ask you," he replied, somewhat subdued, " to avoid making things unnecessarily unpleasant."

" Things need not be at all unpleasant," she cried passionately, " if only you weren't such a brute."

She had not meant to say this.

He smiled a trifle cynically.

" Do you really think I'm a brute ? " he asked. " There are lots of others who would agree with you," he added encouragingly.

" I certainly think you are," she replied, determined to uphold her statement. " Wasn't it brutal to say you wanted to get rid of me ? "

"But it was true."

"Was it?"

"Quite!"

"Really?"

"If you only knew—Look here: there are moments when, if I could have had you painlessly extracted, I would have done it. I would have strangled you with my own fingers if I had not kept control of them!"

"And so, as I couldn't be painlessly extracted, you extracted yourself, eh?"

"Yes."

She laughed a trifle hysterically.

"Was it painless?" she enquired archly.

He swore under his breath.

"It was not," he replied curtly.

Pause. . . . They were walking on the narrow ridge of the sea-wall, he in front and she a few paces behind. Neither could see the face of the other. The tide was coming in. . . . If they had not been busy with other matters they might have noticed the loveliness of the scene. . . .

"The fact is," he said gruffly, "I was in love with you against my will."

She had known that for a long while, but she liked to hear him say it. And she was infected with a childish daring. She laughed boisterously.

"What?" she cried. "You in love with me?—Surely not? Never—I don't believe it, Mr. Verreker."

He answered, slowly and methodically: "It was so. . . . I will tell you about it if you wish to know. When I first heard you play before Razounov at my house I knew that you were no genius, but a person of slightly above average ability who might be trained or coerced into doing something worth while. But there were lots of people like that whom I refused to teach. I was going to refuse you, though I didn't want to. A friend of yours—your fiancé, I supposed at that time—was offering to pay for your lessons. It seemed a capital excuse for accepting you as a pupil. To my everlasting regret I grabbed hold of it eagerly. You

came to me once a week and I pumped music into you at the rate of three guineas a lesson. . . . Even then I believe I was in love with you. . . .

" I must have been," he continued, " because you were such a little fool that normally I should have chucked you up. You had a horrible set of musical bad manners, and not an idea of how to play. I had to give you huge quantities of myself. I thought then I might create out of you something it would be worth my while to love. I tried. I admit you had remarkable receptiveness. You gulped down everything I offered you. . . . In fact, I *made* you. You hadn't an idea in your head till I put some there. You couldn't have played a note at a public concert unless I had shown you how to. You were absolutely dependent on me. . . . When I left your life you went smash. You found you couldn't play without me. I was your sole source of inspiration, and you could no more play without me than a performing monkey will do its tricks without its keeper."

" That's not true," she protested weakly, but he went on.

" Of course it didn't really matter in the least my being in love with you. I had other things to think about. But when you began to be in love with me, things began to be dangerous. You see it was quite impossible for me to marry you."

" Why ? " she said sharply.

" Do you really wish to know ? " he asked.

" I do."

" It will offend you, possibly."

" Never mind. . . . Tell me. . . ."

He paused before answering.

" Well," he said, " this is the politest way I can put it. I could not marry you because you weren't up to standard—my standard, that is."

" What's the matter with me ? "

" You will be offended if I reply."

" Tell me, please."

" If you wish," he said nonchalantly. " To begin with, you are the most selfish person I have ever met. You are

vain, conceited and a prig. Selfishness runs in all your veins. All your desires are selfish—all your aims are selfish—nay, nearly all your actions have been selfish. The only unselfish part of you was the part I compelled you to assimilate, and that was counterfeit. . . . God help any man you marry if he loves you. You will ruin him if you can. If you love him too, so much the worse for him. . . . Do you want me to go on ? "

She bore all this with amazing calmness. True, she had been in some manner prepared for it, but she had not expected the denunciation to be so severe. What surprised her was that it did not hurt her as much as she had anticipated.

She did not answer his question.

" So you loved me against your will ? " she said reflectively.

He nodded.

" Every woman likes to be loved like that," she remarked daringly.

This speech of hers seemed to infuriate him. He stopped his walking and turned round to face her.

" If you can extract any satisfaction from the knowledge that I loved you against my will, have it ! " he cried bitterly. " Nay, I'll even say this : I love you passionately at this very moment. Take my love !—do what you like with it !—it is no concern of mine when it has once been given to you ! . . . I tried once to give you intellectual and spiritual sympathy—you showed me that was no use to you ! You wanted my love ! Well, now you have it, so be satisfied if you can ! You have it, and also my profound dislike and contempt ! "

She thought : If I were to cry now would it have any effect on him ? She tried to cry but could not.

" Turn back now," he commanded. They commenced the homeward journey.

" Why did you marry Helen ? " she asked.

" Because I liked her and respected her."

" And because if you married her you felt safe from me, eh ? "

" If that were a true statement I would never admit it."

"But you do not love her?"

"No."

"Does she know?"

"She does not know. Do you want her to know?"

"I don't care whether she knows or not."

"Well, then, she shall not know. . . ."

They were silent after this for a long while.

The tide was creeping in now through the maze of mud-banks: when they stopped talking they could hear the water oozing and splashing amongst the reeds. The thin streak of river had widened into a broad lake, and over it the sea-gulls were flapping their wings and crying weirdly. And far in the west where the estuary vanished into the grey hills the sun was sinking in proud splendour. In the near distance lay the village, with its line of cottages facing the sea-wall. Here and there the sun had picked out a window and turned it into a glittering ruby.

Oh, it was all inexpressibly beautiful, this evening picture, with the village and the green meadows and the sun and the rising tide! But Catherine scarcely noticed it. She walked on through the long, stiff grasses, and was thinking only of herself. . . .

§ 4

To begin with, she felt very tired and weary. Of course she had done a good deal that day. She had every reason to be physically tired. But it was not altogether physical tiredness. She felt like a child who has been looking forward to something for a long time, and is disappointed because its expectations are not realized. And again she felt relieved, as one who has been harbouring a vague dread and finds that the worst is not half so bad as was thought. And again she felt sorry, as if both her disappointment and her relief were things to be regretted and to feel ashamed of. And somewhere—vaguely—subconsciously—what was the thought that came to her? A revolutionary thought, a thought that marked an epoch in her life and development. Nothing less than the thought that the things he and she had been discussing, the questions that at one time had

seemed the most momentous in her life, were now become by the sad process of time stale, unmeaning, and out of date. Of historic and achæological interest, maybe, but not living things as she had expected them to be living. She had expected to be immensely moved, immensely stirred by this conversation with him. She had expected it so confidently that she had been stirred at the thought of being stirred. She had tuned herself in readiness for a great conflict. And now the conflict had begun, had lasted and was over. She had not been stirred. Not that the blows had been light. It was something in her that gave her a new invulnerability, a strange imperviousness to blows. Her expectations, her dreads, her excitement, her preparations for conflict, all had been for nothing. And now that she realized that they had been for nothing she felt the effect of them—they made her tired, weary, worn out. The tension snapped. Vaguely she felt sorry that she was not suffering more acutely: vaguely she felt that her invulnerability was purchased at a great price. But try as she would she could not help but feel that her conversation with him had been a futile disinterment of dead bones. . . . She was not hurt. But she was tired—weary —as after a successful and dangerous operation.

They both felt that they had said all that need be said. On the way home scarcely a remark passed between them, except once or twice when he called her attention to the scenery.

He said: "The tide is coming in fast now. It comes in by inches as you watch it."

She replied: "Yes," but she did not think what she was saying.

When they got back to "Seahill," he disappeared into the garage to prepare the car for use. She was left for a few moments with Helen.

Their conversation (lasting for two minutes) was full of amazing things.

Helen began it.

"Well," she said, "what do you think of him?"

"He's very clever."

" Yes," agreed Helen, surprisingly, " and like all clever men he is rather stupid. He's so stupid that he thinks I don't understand him."

Pause. Catherine was too much astonished to reply.

" Of course he doesn't love me," she went on. " I know that, though he thinks I don't. . . . I shouldn't be at all surprised if he loves you."

Pause.

" Though of course you and he would never get on at all well together. You're not suited. . . . Now we (he and I) get on splendidly. I help him with his literary work. The other day he said to me (I had just finished typing at his dictation) : ' Helen, it's just splendid to think that you do all this stuff because you take a living interest in it and not on my account ! ' I was frightfully pleased : I think it was the best compliment he's ever paid me."

Pause.

" Though of course," a little wistfully, " it wasn't at all true. I don't take a living interest in it at all : I only do it to please him. And I can only please him by making him think I'm not doing it to please him. That's why I say he's stupid."

Pause.

" I suppose I shall see you again sometime ? "

" Possibly. I don't know. . . . I don't think I shall come again."

" I hope you will. . . . I suppose you like him ? Well, so do I. That ought to be something in common between us."

Pause.

" Oughtn't it ? "

Catherine did not answer. But Helen kissed her very affectionately. And at that moment Verreker entered in motor-cap and goggles.

" We'll catch the 9.40 at the junction," he said. " Come along ! "

A four-seater car stood in the courtyard.

" Get in the back seat," he said gruffly.

§ 5

As the car drew them through the sweet-scented country lanes Catherine lolled amongst the heavy cushions and pondered. Once again she had the feeling that had comforted her when she first realized that her musical career was at an end. It was the feeling that she was not going to be very disappointed. Once again, too, she was subtly disappointed at not being disappointed. . . . Helen had said that he was stupid. That remark set in motion a whole avalanche of unspoken ideas that had been gathering patiently about her for some time. She had not noticed them then, but now as they came tumbling about her ears she perceived them in bulk as a sudden new revelation. They shifted Verreker to a less hallowed perspective. The halo left him and he became a man. And a stupid man at that. She began to sum him up dispassionately, and was amazed at the results she came to. . . .

Even his eccentricities—which she had hitherto admired—lost their glamour and became either vices or the mere foibles of a crank. His manners were atrocious. He did not raise his hat to her in the street. When entering and leaving a railway compartment he did not allow her to take the first place. It was things like those that went to make up a gentleman. And, frankly, he was not a gentleman. His rudeness, his brusquerie, his awful bluntness of speech, were vices which his cleverness might explain but could not excuse. And even his cleverness—might it not be possible to exaggerate that? He was not well known: his books were dry and uninteresting—abstruse, maybe, but extremely tiresome. And even in music, how was it that he had never made a name at concert playing? One remark of his which had especially annoyed her had been his blunt asseveration that her musical success had been derived solely from his instruction. She could not deny this even to herself, but she found partial, if illogical, comfort in the thought: If he can make me into a successful concert pianist, why hasn't he ever thought it worth while to make himself one?

And he had treated her abominably It gave her a curious pleasure to discover that. The magnitude of his ill-treatment of her seemed by a subtle process of ethical cancelling out to wipe away all record of her own previous misdeeds.

Once again her soul was white, immaculate, redeemed by his cruelty and her consequent martyrdom. The very thought that his debt to her was incapable now of being ever repaid put her on the plane of loftiest altruism. She was still proud, triumphant, superbly conscious of her own supremacy.

When her ideals had tottered one by one, and at last she had realized the futility of her musical ambitions, she had thought: Here goes my last ideal! Henceforth I am without them. . . But now she saw that there had been a survivor that had remained with her even to the last. And that was her ideal of him—a man, superbly good, superbly great, fit object of her respect and worship. . . . Now this ideal had tottered and fallen also. He was a mere irritable crank, pedantically clever, perhaps, but rather brutal and, as Helen said, curiously stupid.

The car went racing up the low hills from the estuary inland. . . . Was it a case of " sour grapes " ? she wondered for a fleeting moment, but she answered " No " with sufficient emphasis to convince herself.

Of course he had assumed that she loved him. But was that true? Did she? . . . Anyway, there were many reasons for getting married, and love was only one of them, and perhaps neither the best nor the most frequent. There was companionship, for instance, and a desire for home and children and money. One might marry in order to secure at a cheaper rate the services of a skilled shorthand-typist. . . . One might even marry to secure part ownership of a motor-car.

§ 6

At the junction he saw her on the platform, shook hands with her very quietly and, she had to admit, for him, very politely, and then left her. She heard him drive off out of the station courtyard, and saw the headlights of his car flashing over the hill beyond the town. . .

An episode in her life was closed.

It was half-past nine. The bookstall had just opened for a few moments before the arrival of the night train to town. She spent some time examining the cheap novels it displayed for sale, and finally with perfect *sang-froid* she purchased a sevenpenny detective story, with a paper wrapper depicting a woman in evening dress sprawled face downwards across some stairs with a revolver by her side. . . .

The train came in, and she found a comfortable seat next to the window. "Chelmsford and London only!" the porters called out, and she smiled quietly. Her fellow travellers were mainly half asleep.

After the train had started she fished in her handbag for a sheet of paper and pencil. . . . Then, using her book as a desk, she wrote the following note:

DEAR MR. HOBBS,

How absurd of you to think your invitation had offended me! I am only too grateful to you, and sorry that I could not have come with you to-day. But I shall be pleased to accept your invitation for Monday if you will still have me. I shall like to go into Surrey very much: I have heard such a lot about it but have never been there. It will be rather difficult for us to fix up arrangements about meeting each other, won't it, so perhaps I had better call at your house to-morrow afternoon. (I know your address, I think.) I shan't be able to stay long, though, as I am going to tea with the St. Luke's curate, Mr. Broodbank—do you know him?—a charming and interesting man. Thanks again for your invitation.—Yrs., etc.,

CATHERINE WESTON.

Reading it over afterwards she smiled again to herself. Then she put it in an envelope, addressed the latter, and began to read the detective story. First she scanned the first paragraph of the first chapter, then the last paragraph of the last chapter, and then a paragraph selected haphazard from the middle, this being her established formula for commencing any book. . . . After that she began to read consecutively from the beginning.

After all, she reflected here and there, where the printed matter failed to keep its grip on her attention, the long troublesome episode in her life was over. Henceforth she would be quiet and sedate and respectable, a lady of perfect

manners and breeding. Passion was a tiresome thing. It was, to use a favourite adjective of Mrs. Lazenby's, very "wearing." . . . To-morrow she would have tea with the Rev. Elkin Broodbank, M.A. (Cantab.), and discuss church missals and cassocks and Puseyism. On Monday she would go with Mr. Hobbs on the top of a bus to Reigate. He would be frantically polite and meekly adoring. He was, at any rate, a gentleman. . . .

The detective story began to be interesting, so she ceased her musings, and meanwhile the train went speeding Londonwards. . . .

THE END

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